If the World Burned to Ash, Still We Would Remain

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If the World Burned to Ash, Still We Would Remain

by orphan_account

Summary

“You always did like taking care of the aftermath,” Will softly stated.

Hannibal paused, spoon halfway to Will’s mouth.

“Yes…I very much enjoyed administering comfort to counteract the pain in regard to you,” Hannibal quietly affirmed, bringing the spoon to Will’s lips.

“Pain you inflicted,” Will declared matter-of-factly.

“Only seemed appropriate. Your pleasure felt like it belonged to me every bit as much as your agony."

Hannibal and Will leave the safe house in New Hampshire and sail to the Côte d’Ivoire. Navigating the combination of their mutual dark appetites, can they avoid mutually assured destruction? Is everything aligned perfectly for once?

Part 2 of a series. Not absolutely necessary to read the first part, but it does of course help with character development and understanding the established relationship.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> I'm so happy I finally got this chapter up. I don't care that it's past 2 AM right now because I have missed posting on here so much and working with these characters! Those who read the first fic in this series: don't worry, a certain "gift" Will was going to give to Hannibal is coming. I've already started writing it and am pretty pumped about it. I'm just experimenting a little with going back and forth in time is all so sorry to tease you. :) BUT IT'S COMING REAL SOON.
>
> ETA: Forgot to thank the magnificent @castellomargot for being my beta for this (that's what happens when I upload stuff at 3 AM on no sleep lol)! She was a great help!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal and Will had first crossed paths with Mr. Hamish Ritchie when he rented the cottage in rural, isolated Île Boulay down the road from them for a week. The island was about a twenty minute boat ride from the bustling hub of Abidjan, one of the most populous cities of the Ivory Coast, and therefore afforded the fugitive pair a much desired level of privacy while still keeping them connected to the thriving metropolitan life of the city if they so chose.

A loutish Scottish investment broker with a penchant for women of questionable age and excessive consumption of cheap liquor, he had disturbed the peace of their secluded island paradise with a nearly nonstop party for his entire stay, guests of ill repute parading in and out of his rental in an endless glitzy night club-esque blur that, needless to say, did not please Hannibal in the slightest.

Hannibal, predictably, was not a fan of the man even before he opened his lips to utter so much as one discourteous, crude phrase. Hannibal was in the garden when Hamish, clad in a gaudy, shiny silver suit that would have been at home on the red carpet for any tacky music awards show, first introduced himself. Barely able to contain the subtle flaring of his nostrils, the cannibal had outstretched his hand to shake the one offered to him. Catching a whiff of the cheap cologne he was so inordinately doused in that it constituted an olfactory assault of epic proportions, Hannibal's lips twitched imperceptibly. Leaning in slightly, he also detected a note of stale scotch on his breath.

"I suppose we're neighbors," Hamish had said with the toothy, fraudulent grin of a con artist accustomed to coasting through life on false promises spoken with a saccharine coating designed to hide what's underneath. He was a handsome man about late 30s-early 40s but in a way that was very average and manufactured, as if he had been assembled in a factory rather than created from a unique gene pool. There was nothing memorable or interesting in

the curve of his jawline or the slope of his nose, nothing deep or intriguing behind the lackluster sparkle of his cornflower blue eyes as he shook Hannibal's hand.

"It would appear so. How long will you be residing in *our* little corner of the island?" Hannibal stressed the word *our* with a possessive note that was designed to be subtle enough to fly over Hamish's head, although it was clear that he was not man who needed subtlety to completely miss acerbic intent. Hannibal flashed back an equally artificial smile, albeit one that was much more refined and practiced than Mr. Ritchie's. Hannibal could play that game better than anyone, and someone like Ritchie was woefully unequipped to match him in this arena. If one thought they had Hannibal fooled, it was because he wanted them to think that. Right up until the exact moment he didn't of course.

"Only about a week. Just wanna give you a warnin' cause it won't be quiet. I come out here about twice a year. Usually bring the friends whose wives don't fancy them getting drunk for days on end, and no one breathes a word of what happens when it's all over." He started to laugh and then promptly stopped when he saw no amusement in Hannibal's cool gaze. Glancing down at Hannibal's left hand and finding no wedding ring, he tried a different approach in an attempt to soften him. "Feel free to stop by and join in. Plenty of beautiful young women at these week long bashes. I'm sure you'd be a big hit. Nothing like an accent and a bit of status to get you exactly want you want, is there?"

Hannibal inwardly laughed at just how supremely Hamish was miscalculating only a couple minutes into their conversation. Here was a man who fancied himself charming and able to glide through sticky situations on the strength of that alone yet he was floundering in front of Hannibal with laughable immediacy. It wasn't a bad strategy overall: invite your attractive neighbor who appears to be a bachelor into the festivities right off the bat to avoid complaints about how raucous and disruptive they are later. After all can't complain about a party if you're there having a good time, can you? Sure, it was an okay strategy and one that would appeal to the baser instincts of a certain stereotypical, sleazy ideal of masculinity that Hannibal was sure Hamish liked to surround himself with, but he was so badly mistaken this time and had absolutely no idea of the extent of his error.

"Well, as much as that's totally true because it worked on me like a charm, I'm a little opposed to seeing its potent effect on anyone else if I can avoid it." Will smiled in mock innocence as he emerged from the side of the house and wound an arm around Hannibal's waist. He had been eavesdropping from just behind the fenced-in portion of their yard, dropping down from his comfy position in the hammock to lean against the dark wooden pickets and peer through the gaps. Unsure if he wanted to forego introversion in favor of curiosity, he lingered for a couple minutes before sneaking out to save his lover from the dull conversation. Knowing Hannibal better than anyone at this point, Will had no doubt that despite his politeness, he was inwardly cringing and aching for this exchange to end.

The Scotsman laughed and scratched the back of his neck as he bowed his head a little in embarrassment, shifting in his suit in a way that made it seem ill-fitting on him and even uglier than before. This only served to make Will more comfortable in his own skin, glad to deliver discomfiture so easily with barely a word. Being in a relationship that made people uncomfortable just by virtue of its existence was new territory for Will, and he was finding so far that it suited his defiant nature. He felt a pleasurable little ping in the back of his brain

every time he made someone squirm. Straightening his posture and elongating his limbs, Will tightened his grip on Hannibal's waist. Hannibal smiled proudly at him. Seeing Will exude confidence like that, so far removed from the withdrawn boy fighting to disappear that he used to be, was always a beautiful thing to witness.

"I can definitely appreciate that. He seems like quite the catch. Well, both of you lads are welcome anytime." The man flashed an awkward, crooked grin as his eyes darted from Will to Hannibal and back again, sizing up their dynamic and presumably looking for an alternate route of exploitation now that his first attempt had fallen so embarrassingly flat.

Will could sense he was accustomed to schmoozing in fluorescent-lit boardrooms filled with clones of himself and clients waiting to be disingenuously worshipped at post-deal cocktail receptions. He closed his eyes and pictured it, allowing his empathy to briefly walk him through the man's phony life. It felt sordid and sad in its emptiness, like there was a blank spot where his connection to family, loved ones, *anyone* at all, should have been. All that remained was avarice and a hollow need to take, take, take with little consideration for consequences or reciprocation until there was nothing left. It was somehow just as chilling to glimpse as the minds of the grisly killers he had profiled. It was a cold and meaningless void.

"Do you by any chance have a business card?"

Will looked a little nonplussed at the odd question but didn't ask Hannibal why he needed it. Neither did Hamish.

After Hamish handed over a cream colored card with raised aqua lettering brandishing his contact information, they exchanged closing greetings (careful to remember their new identities), and he headed back to his rented villa. Will dropped his arm from his partner's side as Hannibal bent down to pick up his pruning shears. Will didn't know if it was possible to prune a rose bush resentfully, but the poor thing seemed to be on the receiving end of Hannibal's ire, serving as a proxy for the target Hannibal really wanted to direct his disapproval toward.

"You know I used to regret not having been there to see the look on your face when Mason obliterated the arm of that chair in your office, but I think I'm seeing that expression right now," Will said with an affectionate smile as he tenderly ruffled Hannibal's hair. "What did that rose bush ever do to you? And why did you need his business card?"

"He was exceptionally distasteful, and I expect to only find him to be even more so in the course of his short stay," Hannibal said in a detached voice, the disgust on his face fading into nonchalance as quickly as it had appeared.

"And as for the latter question…I would prefer to provide you with a more thorough explanation later if you would not mind." Hannibal smiled as he looked off into the distance at the blue façade of the Scotsman's house. The construction was much more modern and distinctly out of place in comparison to their temporary abode, all high single-paned sliding glass with everything divided by harsh rectangular cuts.

"His worst offense so far is wearing what I'm sure you consider to be an atrocious suit and some garden variety objectification of women. Let's wait and see, okay? We've only been

here a couple weeks. It might bring unnecessary attention to us if our only neighbor disappears without a trace after just a day. Besides, he's a little far away. With any luck, we won't even notice him." Will leaned in to kiss Hannibal's perspiring brow and lingered for a few seconds, lips skimming his flushed-from-labor skin, before heading to the hammock he had tied between a palm tree and a solid, thick-trunked ancient kapok to enjoy the weather with a book before the sunset. He didn't mention any of the hackle-raising realizations he had experienced when he delved into their neighbor's brain. Will was in no rush to plot his demise. If Hamish became a nuisance, he was sure the topic would be revisited.

Settling in with his neck cradled by a small pillow, Will opened *The Folding Star* and removed his bookmark to pick up where he had left off only a few minutes ago. The seclusion of this portion of their land was serene and relaxing, and Will found himself wiling away many a sun-kissed hour there, content to be inert in a way he had never before experienced. Will was used to a restlessness permeating his solitary time, perpetually fidgeting and itching to complete some useful manual task even though most of what he had done in his spare time (tinkering with temperamental, outdated boat motors and capricious appliances around the house) was just busy work to which he assigned false necessity. It was more about occupying his every whirring mind than accomplishing anything, usually brought on by insomnia or a need to halt the ever present sense of loneliness and existential dread.

Now that he was starting to truly trust that Hannibal was a confidante and partner to turn to when the thoughts were overwhelming, Will found that the consuming darkness crept in to mentally capsize him much less, the feelings of uncertainty gradually losing ground to the unmistakable sense of being right where one belonged for once. Will had never felt so much like he was in his rightful place in the universe as he did now.

Meanwhile, Hannibal continued to dubiously eye the villa Hamish would now be occupying. If there was one sin Hannibal was often so guilty of that he did not notice the extent to which it was a detriment, it was hubris. Since their recovery and journey across the ocean in a boat helmed by none other than Will, his partner in all things great and small, aspects both every day and esoteric, Hannibal found his pride in being a self-contained monster whose Pandora's box only opened at the precise moment he desired it was getting the better of him. Hannibal enjoyed having a laugh at the expense of those in the psychiatric field who, after his arrest and incarceration, were brimming with long-winded conjectures about his "compulsion" to kill, his uncontrollable drive that was so powerfully innate that it couldn't be suppressed even if he wanted to. He was deemed to be beyond rehabilitation by most, as he was shown to be devoid of remorse and far too knowledgeable of the inner-workings of psychotherapy and the brain to fall under the guided influence of any therapist or treatment plan that could be provided.

Hannibal was too pleased with himself, too confident that he was in control of his own actions and that his capacity in this area rivaled that of everyone around him, to entertain this possibility. After all, he went long stretches without quenching his cannibalistic appetite when he plotted his ornate Ripper scenes. He behaved under Alana's rule in the BSHCI. As much as she and Jack and everyone else bought into the security of the walls that held him, Hannibal was much too cunning for any manmade contraption to lock him in forever. If he had truly wanted to, he would have spent all of his idle hours devising a plan, a veritable trail of destruction to pave his path to freedom, and left triumphantly as crimson rivers of carnage

flowed down the halls in his wake. He was so steadfast in his belief about this that after their escape from the states, he did not initially register the roiling snarl of hunger searing his blood from the inside out as a threat until it felt like a living, breathing creature skittering underneath his skin.

By the time the hunger reared its ugly head, all razor sharp fangs and primal instinct, he was mildly shocked by its sudden appearance. However, true to form, Hannibal stepped back to observe with a cool rationality and evaluated it as though it was happening to someone else, affecting an objectivity most could not muster. He immediately eliminated the possibility of the length between kills being the catalyst as he had already proven that he could go much longer in-between sounders.

Do you believe you could change me the way I've changed you? I already have. Hannibal ceased his maintenance on the garden and smiled to himself as he ascertained the source of this burgeoning eagerness. It was almost childlike in the innocent nature of it, a sweetness around the edges of a powerful darkness like a sticky, sugary chocolate coating around a pungent mouthful of bourbon, the chocolate hitting your taste buds just before the alcohol singes your senses and surges through your nose and down your throat like warmth eroding the snow, icy hot and sudden. He was, simply, intoxicated by the anticipation of finally hunting with Will. *Truly* hunting with the meticulous, suave sense that he would impart to Will at his leisure, fading back into the shadows like vapor to allow Will to *become* without interference and only stepping forward like some sinister guardian angel when Will needed guidance.

The thrill of this gift, so long sought after and now finally coming to magnificent fruition, was more overpowering than any mind-altering substance known to man, more delicious than any painstakingly crafted gourmet dish from the rarest kitchens in the most obscure corners of the Earth. Hannibal was very nearly giddy with it. At this realization, the restless feeling finally subsided. The prickly sensation of tiny unknown insects trying to claw out from under his skin dissipated as the rage-fueled hunger for flesh and blood and bone cooled down to a simmer. His smile widened, beatific and pure as he headed inside. He reminded himself not to confuse this new facet of his urges with the automatic hair-raising response Hamish had given him.

When a probable target made its presence known to Hannibal, his whole being acted in a very visceral way. As usual with Hannibal, this was completely unbeknownst to those around him as his exterior remained as collected as ever, but inside it was like a cat arching its back at a perceived threat, animalistic instincts recognizing an enemy before it even knows why. Yes, the businessman appeared to be oafish and generally unpleasant but perhaps he was harmless. Hannibal didn't need him to be a malevolent person to make the decision to sever his arteries and gut him like a pig, but Will had different standards and Hannibal was learning to take that into account. Perhaps Hannibal's impulse here was tempered by his desire to share this with Will as soon as possible and see him in glorious, unmitigated action. After all, it was impossible for his avidity to not be partially filtered through his feelings for Will now that he was allowing them to govern his actions with complete acceptance for the changes it would bring about. After heading inside the house and pulling the Nile perch from the fridge to prepare for dinner, he decided to table the idea of bringing about Mr. Ritchie's untimely end for now. All would reveal itself in good time.

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Will groaned and pressed the tips of his fingers into his closed eyelids until he saw stars. Hannibal reached out a conciliatory hand to pat his arm. Light was filtering in through the slats in the blinds despite how tightly closed they were and the pounding, head-splitting beat of repetitive dance music was ensuring a lack of restful sleep for either of them. Will's eyes felt like they were coated in a film of finely textured grit. He didn't need a mirror to know how bloodshot and haggard they looked. This was the third night in a row that their island peace had felt more like a club for tawdry rich tourists who stomp into a foreign country and demand that everyone accommodate them. Hamish and his cohorts were the sort of ill-mannered nouveau riche type to wave bills around in lieu of social graces, refusing to even attempt to speak the language of the country they were visiting.

"I could very easily draft a tempting dinner invitation to deliver to our dear neighbor in the morning."

"It IS morning," Will replied curtly as he glanced at the clock. It read four AM. "And no. He'll be gone in a few days. Let's just wait it out."

"As you wish." Hannibal kissed Will's cheek and nestled into the side of his neck. Will sighed heavily and drummed his fingers over his stomach.

"No argument? No 'your standards for what constitutes a worthy target are much too high' speech? Really?"

"I am far too enervated for that right now."

"Hannibal?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think you'll be awake for a while?"

"I should think that outcome is hardly avoidable given the current circumstances."

"Are you alert enough to…pass the time with me?" Will turned on his side and began to kiss Hannibal's shoulder, combing his fingers through the soft, graying hair on his chest.

Hannibal laughed quietly.

"I can think of no better way to offset this unfortunate situation. Anything in particular you would like?" Hannibal mouthed at Will's neck and pressed their bodies closer together, his cock already coming to life just from the thought of what would come next. Will had grown progressively bolder and more commanding in bed while still craving Hannibal's control and demands as well. Their sex life was a veritable rotating buffet of power dynamics and shared roles that mirrored the structure of their lives in other respects, and it was a titillating parallel

Hannibal was glad to see he had accurately predicted. The way their separate complex thought processes intersected had been beyond thrilling out of the bedroom for years. Being able to experience it on this level too heightened everything that already existed between them and left them always craving more from each other, always seeking to reach new peaks of experience and pleasure together.

Hannibal resisted the urge to provide an analysis on this, full well knowing that while weaving through the connections to map the significance of the parallels only served to magnify the beauty of it for Hannibal, for Will it did quite the opposite. Nothing took him out of the moment quite like being reminded of the intricacy of the brain and its ability to take a train of thought and run with it at full speed. Where Hannibal found romance in research and overwrought academic approaches, Will found a sterile, clinical vibe that stripped away the magic. Finding that he was very fond of seeing Will at peace and carefree these days, Hannibal had taken to biting his tongue a little more when it seemed like rocking the boat would result in Will withdrawing and wearing that world-weary, pensive countenance of his. He looked so much older when his brows knit together in that expression, his normally soft, inviting mouth tightening into a thin, taut line, the cerulean of his eyes darkening into a stormy, midnight blue, flecks of black seeming to shade his irises. Hannibal was fascinated by those eyes and how they seemed to alter like a mood ring, changing into different shades of green and blue depending on the light in the room or the topic of conversation. His beautiful Will was only more remarkable the longer he looked at him.

“I want to ride you until I come, and I don’t want you to let me touch myself no matter how much I beg,” Will whispered fiercely, wrapping his legs around Hannibal’s waist and flipping them over until Hannibal was on his back with Will astride his hips.

“And you *will* beg, won’t you?” Hannibal moaned as Will ground his hips down and snared a fistful of Hannibal’s hair. His hair had grown long since they left the cabin, a little longer than it had been when Will knew him in Baltimore. It leant Hannibal a bohemian professorial air that Will thought really suited him. Granted, he was so undeniably striking that Will wasn’t sure there was any look that wouldn’t be sexy on him. Will had loved touching Hannibal’s hair since they began to be intimate, surprised by how silky and fine it was, but he loved it even more now that he was no longer sporting that cropped cut life at the BSHCI had foisted upon him. It was a tangible reminder of Hannibal coming back to himself little by little as he stretched out his limbs in the open air to enjoy his freedom.

“Of course. I always beg. I know you love it when I do.” Will crashed their mouths together, his tongue parting Hannibal’s curved lips insistently, desperate to consume him, to crawl inside him and be completely overtaken.

“Maybe you haven’t been good enough for me to give you what you are asking for,” Hannibal teased as he roughly grasped Will’s hips on either side and began to lift him off his lap.

Will swiftly clasped Hannibal’s wrists and pinned them to the bed on either side of his head as he leaned forward to bite his neck, needing to taste every part of him.

“*Please*, Hannibal,” Will whispered hoarsely as his tongue traced the edge of Hannibal’s ear, “I’ll be good for you. I’ll do whatever you want. You know I will. Just fuck me, *please*.”

“Not yet.” Hannibal affected an even, calm tone, but Will could tell he was fighting not to sound breathless. These days, Hannibal was much more willing to admit that Will could destroy his composure with one lustful look, one salaciously murmured comment. It was a beautiful thing to behold, a man like Hannibal letting his guard down and surrendering to being vulnerable in bed. Even when Hannibal let Will hold him down and fuck him in the cabin back in New Hampshire, Will had wondered in the back of his mind if it was mostly for show, a gesture of compromise to show that Hannibal was serious but one that was only temporary until he could be back in the position of authority.

All worry about that had since been eroded. Subtle as Hannibal’s emotional “tells” were, Will found that he knew them as well as the landscape of his own skin and was ecstatic to see that Hannibal really did relish relinquishing control to Will as much as he loved doling out orders, hovering above Will with a slackened, hungry mouth ready to devour as he watched him do exactly as he was told.

Will groaned in frustration as Hannibal effortlessly broke free of his hold and flipped Will onto his back. Hannibal’s strong thighs bracketed his hips, and Will helplessly thrust toward him, chasing everything Hannibal was refusing to give. His cock twitched on his stomach as though it could beckon the older man closer, but Hannibal strengthened his hold on Will, knees squeezing tighter as he stayed just out of reach. His own erection was just inches away from Will’s swollen cock, but he refused to lean forward to give will the contact he ached for. Instead, he tipped back ever so slightly to widen the distance.

“Impatient boy,” Hannibal chastised, eyes bright and insatiable.

“Yes,” Will hissed, demanding hands pulling Hannibal closer as he bit down on his shoulder.

Hannibal nuzzled against Will’s neck, breathing in the fragrant scent that was now thickened into a musky, earthy intensity from his arousal. Finally afforded the privilege of being as close to Will as he wanted to and as frequently as he coveted, Hannibal had come to learn the subtle shifts in Will’s scent, pheromones wafting from his pores in potent currents corresponding to how fearful, anxious, or simply content Will was. At the core it was always the same, some impossible to name dark sparking scent like the aftermath of smoldering fireworks but tinged with a lasting sweetness both entirely missing from nature and yet married to it by sense recognition somehow, as though his skin was borne of the Earth instead of a womb. When Hannibal closed his eyes and inhaled, he could picture it. He saw Will’s limbs winding through moist, rich soil, his body rising up like some prehistoric, glowing creature slipping from the primordial ooze, fresh and alabaster and dewy, the template for a new supreme being.

It was just the edges of the smell that changed, little serrated spikes puncturing through the center of it to make the variation known. His arousal lent it a hickory, smoky layer, intensifying that pastoral aspect that already existed and adding something decidedly more pungent, almost like logs in a fire extinguished and left long soaked by a torrential rain. His fear was like a sister scent, appropriately joined to his arousal while still being in opposition to it. It held hints of the woodsy fragrance but had sweeter undertones, syrupy honeysuckle and crushed peony petals. Hannibal savored the taste and smell of Will’s fear just as much as his excitement, a dangerous slope but one that only made sense for them. He was positively

addicted to it, craved it like a man descending voraciously on an oasis after wandering lost in the desert for days.

“You are going to let me use that perfect mouth of yours first,” Hannibal whispered insistently, voice raspy with lack of sleep. The sun was beginning to show its first silver rays through the bamboo blinds, lending Hannibal a soft glow around the parts of his profile that were still obscured by darkness. He was somehow even more commanding and powerful of a presence in the shadows cast by the gentle light.

Will moaned and nodded, not really caring so much about a delay in gratification. This part of their game was every bit as satisfying as getting what he wanted. Hannibal slid off him, causing Will to whimper at the loss of his warmth, and stood up a few feet away from the bed.

“Sit on the edge of the bed.”

Will obeyed immediately, the hallmark of patience as he looked up at Hannibal and awaited further instruction. Hannibal took his time approaching the bed, luxuriating in the way Will raptly watched his finely formed frame. Coming to stand between Will’s legs, Hannibal nudged Will’s knees apart as his hands settled in his hair. He brought one of his hands down the side of Will’s face slowly, running his thumb along Will’s bottom lip. Will gazed back at him, eyelids heavy with arousal as he fought the urge to run his tongue along that thumb, hands twitching in his lap with the effort to remain still.

“Am I going to have to tie your hands?” Hannibal said matter-of-factly, his expression remaining as placid as ever.

“No.” Will shook his head slowly, eyes hooded as he placed his hands palm down on the tops of his own thighs and forced them to be stock still.

“My good boy,” Hannibal whispered softly as he ran his fingers through Will’s hair. He looked at Will tenderly for a second before his eyes hardened again, the formidable beast back in control. “Open your mouth.”

Will paused for a second to consider his options. Biting down on his bottom lip to contain a grin, he remained immobile. Slowly, Will parted his lips just enough to be visible but not enough for even a finger to slip past.

“I think you can ask better than that, Hannibal.” Will’s tone was mocking and challenging as he fixed him with a defiant stare.

Hannibal’s fingers wound tightly in Will’s hair, pulling his head back harshly as his other hand curled around Will’s throat possessively. He squeezed Will’s neck but kept the pressure light. It was just enough to make his dominance known and serve as a reminder of what he was capable.

“One would think you did not care very much about obtaining that which you requested, ill-mannered as you are being in this moment. What shall I do about that?” The hand in his hair tightened, and Will gasped as he pressed his palms down onto his thighs to keep from

reaching out. His arousal was so painful now that it was taking every iota of control he possessed to refrain from touching himself and wantonly begging Hannibal to make him come, to seal his hot mouth around Will's dick, to fuck him raw, anything.

"I'm sorry," Will said, voice dripping with a disingenuous, treacly intent.

"I don't believe that you are, dear Will." Hannibal removed his hands and pushed Will onto his back as he clambered over him. Intimidating and gorgeous, he loomed above him without speaking for a moment, one hand clamping around Will's wrists to pin them above his head. Hannibal leaned in, his lips so torturously close to grazing Will's own that his breath ghosted across Will's face with every syllable he spoke. Still, he refused to close that inch of space and give Will the satisfaction of a claiming kiss. "In fact, it appears that you have asked for one thing when you really desired another entirely and are now bating me into providing you with that under the guise of granting me an insincere opportunity to exert control. Perhaps it is time that I truly test the limits of your patience and obedience so that you may come to understand what it means to truly serve my needs without an underlying selfish motive that you fail to even properly conceal."

Will squirmed under Hannibal's body, and Hannibal responded by pressing his torso down and clamping his legs in a vise grip around Will's upper thighs. Will felt Hannibal's cock hot and hard against his own and let out a noise that was halfway between a satisfied moan and a fearful whimper. He had been wanting this for a while now, desperate to see what Hannibal would do when allowed to truly dominant instead of just meeting already agreed upon requirements. Everything up until now had felt safe, gradual and cautious in a way that Will *needed* to acclimate himself to the idea that there were other desires beyond his homicidal impulses whose depth and nature were murky like the bottom of a dark, muggy swamp, scary only in that way that the unknown exudes mystery.

Now, he found himself craving more new experiences and having more curiosity about what Hannibal would surprise him with when not given any guidelines. It was one thing to ask for a specific fantasy to be fulfilled and another entirely to hand the reins over for an undefined experience wherein the only requirement was that Hannibal make him *his.* However he wanted to do that was up to him, and Will eagerly awaited the opportunity to find out what form that would take.

Without warning, Hannibal released his wrists and removed his body from Will's completely as he returned to a standing position away from the bed, leaving Will's leaking cock agonizingly untouched.

"Get back into bed and attempt to sleep, if you can. I will not touch you in any way that can be construed as carnal. This may only last for a few hours or it may last for days. The length will be at my discretion and my decision about the parameters will not be revealed to you. You will simply have to endure without any knowledge of when it will end. In that time, I may ask for you to complete various small tasks to prove your submission." Hannibal remained standing, hands clasped behind his back. His stance harkened back to how he had looked when he would pace in his old office in Baltimore, matching Will's rhythm as he walked along the book shelves above or across the other side of the room. Back before Will trusted enough to be in closer proximity. Back before he *wanted* any intimacy with Hannibal

or anyone else for that matter, sexual or otherwise. It occurred to Will how similar he had been to the frightened strays he had tamed at home, how Hannibal had coaxed and gently broken him in very much the same way Will would train an animal.

Will glanced over at Winston, asleep on the floor right in front of the bed and oblivious to the noise disturbances from the party. His front paws twitched faintly from whatever doggy dreams were running through his content brain.

“Are you serious?” Will sounded somewhere between aghast and intrigued.

“Quite so. Contingent on your willingness to participate of course.”

They regarded each other intently in silence for a moment. Will moved to a sitting position and braced himself with his palms on the bed slightly behind him, considering the proposition while also fighting to ignore the arousal that still coursed through his body.

“Ok…yeah. I’ve been…sort of wanting something…*more*, but…” Will looked up to find a Cheshire Cat grin spread across Hannibal’s enticing lips. “Oh, don’t look so damn smug. Yeah, yeah, I’m sure you already guessed as much hence this whole…” Will flapped his hands around manically in Hannibal’s direction, “*thing*.”

Hannibal moved to sit beside Will then thought better of it and sat down a couple feet away.

“You’ll need to choose a word, Will.”

“I don’t want a safe word, Hannibal. It feels too…embarrassing and silly or something. You know when to stop. You know my limits, and I trust you to know when I’m serious in my protests about them being violated.”

Hannibal sighed thoughtfully and raised an eyebrow.

“That is quite an unexpected statement from you, all things considered. Regardless, in the future you may not believe that to be the case. Or more to the point, you may desire to be involved in a scenario wherein me violating those limits, even if only in a perceived way, is precisely the point. As escalation continues and you discover more and more about where your proclivities lie, I do not wish to hinder that growth with any mishaps.” Hannibal paused and took a measured breath. “And *I* would feel safer if we did. Just because it is instituted does not mean you have to employ it. You are prone to recklessness from time to time, Will. Do not choose this occasion to exercise that tendency.”

“You’re right. As usual.” Will’s tone was petulant, but he nodded resignedly all the same. “Fuck…I don’t know what to choose.”

Will leaned back on his elbows and sighed. He threw his head back and watched the shadows of the palm trees in their yard dance across the ceiling in the early dawn light. It was still a strange sight to him since their residence was relatively new. It felt more like a projection from a children’s toy meant to fill the scary unknown dark of the night with soothing backlit images than the actual landscape of their home. Will found himself waking up uncertain of his location every morning, fumbling for an anchor of stability in the sheets as he blinked

away the blurred after-images of dreams from his eyes. Naturally, he tended to use Hannibal as that agent of grounding, draping an arm over his stomach or burrowing into the crook of his neck to feel the vibrating rhythm of his pulse, warm and alive and reassuring. What would ground him when their games became too overwhelming? It had to be something chosen with care, something with meaning that would not be mistaken for anything other than what it was. Will bolted upright when it came to him.

"Wendigo," he blurted out, the sudden noise startling them both in the stillness of the early morning. The music filtering in from Hamish's place had ceased at some point during their conversation and an all-consuming silence now blanketed the room.

Hannibal scooted a little closer and drew his knees up, wrapping his arms around them to hug them near his chest. It was a strange, juvenile position to see him in, and it made Will wonder what Hannibal had been like as a boy. Was he always the imperious force Will knew him to be, even in youth? Did adults exchange whispers of speculative terror in his presence, both unsure of how to tame him and whether or not it was even a plausibility? God, he yearned to know *all* of him, every part of the history that shaped Hannibal into the impressive man he saw before him now.

"Might I inquire as to the origin of this unique choice?" Hannibal cocked his head with a half-smile, looking at Will with very much the same amusement he had after the antisocial rebuke Will had delivered to conclude their first meeting. With all that had happened since then, it felt like a lifetime ago.

"I used to have visions of you as a wendigo." Will turned to Hannibal shyly. He hadn't really shared those visions with anyone, let alone the man who was the object of them. "A great leathery, lacquered black creature with tendril-like fingers and protruding ribs, winding antlers scraping across the sky…And I used to see something else before I knew what you were. A raven colored stag breathing heavily like it had been wounded by a hunter but trotting along with power…hooves clattering on the ground and echoing sharply in my ears like they were so real. The wendigo only appeared after I *saw* you, but…the stag never disappeared when that vision materialized. I didn't understand. When it first showed up, I thought it was just Garret Jacob Hobbs haunting me, my guilt, my confusion about myself after I killed him, but…I saw it the night you killed Abigail. I lay on that floor with parts of myself spilling in ever expanding pools all around me and I saw…"

Will turned away as he felt his eyes welling up, the traumatic punch of that night still making itself known no matter how much time had passed. Will wondered if the sting would always be there, receding into a dull ache much like all of his physical scars, scars that deceived by being almost the same color as the rest of his skin. He would look at them sometimes and think about how they were imposter flesh trying desperately to blend in with the rest of the canvas of his body, raised and ridged yet somehow soft to the touch as they faded and grew paler in an attempt to hide themselves.

Will had noticed Hannibal's reception of the tragic road map of Will's nearly mythical life changed depending on his mood. Sometimes he kissed and stroked them with the reverence of a monk lost in prayer, everything in the outside world frozen in time around him as he worshipped the only thing that mattered to him in that moment. Other days he avoided them

as though he was afraid even the flutter of his breath skimming across the pink tinted skin would reopen the wounds, fresh blood pouring out in thick spurts as though long dissolved sutures had been ripped from the crisscrossed patterns where they once laced together broken pieces of Will, refusing to let his haggard form exhale that last gasp no matter what atrocities were unleashed upon it.

“I saw,” Will took a shuddering breath before he gathered himself and continued, “the stag in front of me gasping out its last dying breath, and I realized it was me. I was dying while it was too. I think it was some sort of…I don’t know, coping mechanism maybe? For when I would feel myself slipping under your influence, feel the darkness taking hold of me and showing me what I really was…So yeah…wendigo seems weirdly apropos.”

Will shook his head and rubbed his eyes to try and snap back from drifting too far into his head.

“I agree,” Hannibal made an amused noise in the depths of his throat and smiled lovingly at Will, “Why not summon the name of the beast you have conjured as a representation of that which resides within me when you feel your boundaries have been breached by my dominance? It has a rather poetic implication of the cyclical nature of time. We are back where we started and yet we are also in entirely foreign territory for both of us. It represents both the now and the long bygone. Tell me, do you still see me as that mythical creature?”

“No…well, at least I haven’t in long enough that I don’t think it will be popping up for a surprise visit any time soon. I think…I think it was more linked to a lack of resolution. I don’t think I could see you as anything but beautiful now.” Will’s voice trailed off as he finished his sentence, feeling suddenly bashful about all that he had just revealed. He was still avoiding eye contact with Hannibal, feeling entirely too raw and vulnerable to look into those dark amber eyes.

“And you were never anything less than beautiful to me, Will.” Hannibal reached out a hand to brush back Will’s curls, which had been growing shaggier since their departure from Hannibal’s cabin. “Come. Let us attempt to procure some semblance of normal rest since it now appears that our illustrious neighborhood Steve Rubell has turned in for the morning.”

“I’m sorry…did Hannibal Lecter just make a pop culture reference? To something as current as the latter half of the twentieth century?!” Will’s voice erupted into peals of that particular kind of bubbly laughter that can only be induced by the semi-hysterical state of sleep-deprivation. The kind where your reaction is definitely disproportionate to how funny the situation *actually* is, yet your insomnia-ravaged brain can’t seem to stop reacting like it’s being fed a steady stream of nitrous oxide. Will gasped for air as his giggling turned high-pitched and borderline insane as Hannibal watched him with amusement.

“I am aware of music that stretches beyond the baroque period, Will. My choice to not partake in its insipid, derivative offerings does not lend itself to an ignorance of its existence but rather a mere indifference.” Hannibal let out an exaggerated, put-upon sigh as he moved to get back under the covers on the left side of the bed.

“True. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. I mean, you are old enough to have actually been around for Studio 54, aren’t you?” Will teased as he slipped under the sheets beside Hannibal.

“You are a holy terror, and I must remind you that every act of insubordination could very well contribute to the length of the sentence of your imposed celibacy.” Hannibal said it with raised eyebrows and a light-hearted lilt to his voice so it sounded more jest than threat, but it still gave Will pause.

“When does that start?” Will asked with a hint of reservation in his tone. He was excited to see what would happen in the next few days but also unsure of whether or not he was in over his head. But the thrill of the unknown and the possibility of finding something new to add to their ever-expanding repertoire outweighed any misgivings he had.

“Now,” Hannibal said simply, exhausted eyes fluttering open and closed as he began to drift off.

“Can I still…” Will gestured to the crook of Hannibal’s arm, and Hannibal stretched his elegant limb out in welcome.

“Yes. I will not withhold affection from you completely. I know how psychologically damaging that would be to you.” Hannibal’s voice dwindled as sleep overtook him, and Will nestled in with his head on Hannibal’s chest, relieved to hear that.

“Getting soft in your old age, I see.” Will smiled into Hannibal’s skin as a tired hand half-heartedly swatted his buttocks. He wondered if the unspoken part of that sentiment was that it would be just as damaging to Hannibal too.

The following night brought just as much of a boisterous disturbance wafting over from Hamish’s place as the previous evenings. Will had spent much of the day drifting in and out of sleep until Hannibal had resolutely shaken him awake with a rather obnoxiously parental warning about circadian rhythms and the dangers of completely subverting a normal sleep schedule. Will had muttered under his breath about how Hannibal might be old enough to be his father but that didn’t give him the right to act like it and lobbed a pillow at his head. He grumbled and marched past him as Hannibal uttered a retort about adults who act like sullen teenagers deserving to be treated as such. Heading straight for the hammock, Will tried to doze outside but was unsuccessful. The sun was in full splendor and every bird on the island seemed determined to chirp incessantly at full volume.

The only good side effect of the lost day was that it made the beginning of Hannibal’s intimacy restrictions pass by in the blink of an eye. Will was too groggy and sleep-deprived to be affected by the absence of sex in their interactions, and with the exception of a very late dinner and an hour or two lounging in the living room afterward, he hadn’t even really spent much time in the same room with Hannibal. Of course, it wasn’t lost on Will that having his first day of control completely wasted probably frustrated Hannibal to no end, and he found himself uncontrollably smirking at the thought of it.

Now that evening had fallen and the party across the way was in typical full blast, Will ambled around the extensive land that stretched between the two properties, still unclear as to where exactly the dividing line fell. Despite the aggravating din emanating from Ritchie's place, the incredible pitch black of the country sky was calming and the sounds of the lapping ocean could still be heard when there was a lull in the loud music.

Just as Will started to feel the pull of exhaustion enough to convince him to head back and try his hand at sleep again, his head snapped up at the sound of branches crunching underfoot. Drunken giggles sounded from behind a tree, and Will saw Hamish approaching with a young woman. Both were completely naked. Eyes slanting like a predatory animal spotting his prey across the savanna, Will stood up taller, deliberate and poised to pounce. But as Ritchie drew nearer, Will let his person suit slip over top of him like a garment tailored to hug his every curve as a second skin, obfuscating his spiteful intent. He was a little alarmed at how much animosity flowed through him at the mere sight of the Scotsman. Clearly the lack of sleep and days in a row of their island tranquility being disrupted was coloring his temperament.

"You're out late, neighbor!" Hamish merrily strolled toward him as though he was experiencing no shame regarding the situation, the woman trailing behind him. She huddled behind Ritchie for cover as her hysterical giggles died down.

"I go on walks when I can't sleep. Helps the interminable thoughts quiet down." Will clenched and unclenched his fists slowly as the man came closer.

"Aye. I'm a night owl by nature too, as I'm sure ye noticed by now." His accent had grown thicker with drink, formalism dropping in favor of colloquialisms. "Mary, this is Elijah. Elijah, this is Mary, not so far removed from Magdalene as ye might see."

"Sorry about uh…." Mary cupped a hand over her mouth as laughter spilled from her lips once again and gestured toward the tree where they had presumably been before Will happened along.

"Yeah…I guess your party is going pretty well. She okay?" Will spoke slowly and pointedly, mask of faux amiability still in place although his inward seething was starting to slip through. He doubted Hamish could notice through the haze of alcohol. He was a bit unsteady on his feet, swaying from side to side slightly.

"Aye, she's just a spot guttered is all. Believe me, she gets into a whole lot worse any night of the week. She's a big hit, that one. Always gantin' fur it, aren't ye Mary?" Hamish laughed and winked at Will, trying to appeal to his base desires in the way that scumbags of his particular brand always seem to do in the company of other men. Men like him always assumed there was an unspoken camaraderie, so sure were they of the accuracy of their perverted worldview. *Depravity must be a hell of a drug*, Will thought, *men like him are always so delusional that they think everyone in their gender is as fucking covered in odious slime as they are.*

"You're such a fucking asshole, Hamish." Mary laughed and playfully punched him in the stomach. Will was relieved to see she was lucid, and there wasn't anything more sinister

going on. He wouldn't have put it past Hamish to have a horrible idea of what constitutes consent.

Will took a deep breath and forced a smile. He couldn't do this here. Not only was he not prepared with a weapon or plan of any kind, he also could hear the sounds of the ever raging festivities back at Hamish's villa, deafening and maddening as usual. Any of them could wander over right now. There was also the girl to consider, and besides that, Will didn't want his next kill to be anything less than calculated perfection plotted with Hannibal down to the finest detail.

But the man was testing his patience. He'd ripped into their secluded existence when they'd barely been in the country for a couple weeks and unapologetically shit all over the quiet, rural fishing village. Something about stumbling upon him naked and drunkenly fucking on their lawn like an adolescent idiot just made him tired of holding back, tired of waiting for him to do something truly reprehensible by mainstream society's standards. Who gave a fuck? Rude people deserved to be eaten like the pigs they were. What tragedies would result if Hamish's existence were suddenly wiped from the Earth? His "friends" would no longer have a steady coke supply? His firm would have to hire a replacement from an endless stream of sleazy cheap suit clad Hamish carbon copies just waiting in the wings for the right moment?

"Well, maybe you two should get back before you get lost out here. Things always look different at night."

"Aye." The Scotsman nodded enthusiastically and cradled an arm around Mary as she stumbled a bit in the dark. "Come on now, Mary. Can't have ye passin' out on their lawn. See you around, Elijah!"

"You're the one who fucking passes out everywhere. Not me." Mary rolled her eyes and forcefully steered Hamish in the direction of his house.

Will waved as he watched Hamish stumble away, gait awkward as Mary squealed and ran ahead of him. He watched until they entered the house before turning to head back to his own villa.

"Jesus, Hannibal!" Will jumped as he turned around to find himself face to face with his disquietingly stealthy lover. "I swear, I should put a bell on you. How long have you been standing there lurking like Norman fucking Bates?"

"Only a moment." Hannibal smirked and tucked his hands into his pockets. "And I think I deserve a better, more flattering comparison than Norman Bates."

"I doubt any comparison would be satisfactory to you, and not to feed your already colossal ego, but I doubt I could drum up one that would really do you justice anyway, fictional or otherwise." Will smiled and rocked back on his heels, gazing uneasily in the direction of Ritchie's house. It was brightly lit, but despite the transparent glass everywhere, Will couldn't really see anyone inside from this angle.

“Are you going to inform me of what transpired and left you so perturbed or shall I guess?” Hannibal laid a firm hand on Will’s shoulder.

“Our annoying little drunkard ‘friend’ was naked in our lawn having sex behind a tree. He’s…” Will ran a tired hand down his face and shook his exhausted head.

“Am I sensing correctly that Will Graham is at his wit’s end where our ignoble Scottish neighbor is concerned?” Hannibal did his best to keep his facial expression indifferent, but Will could see the happy crinkle at the corners of his eyes. It was one of those trademark Hannibal Lecter microexpressions that might have gone unnoticed by others, but Will saw the glint of hope in his eyes.

“I almost clocked him over the head right here, Hannibal. I’m just so fucking tired and full of sleep-deprivation fueled irrationality right now. But luckily I remembered that spontaneity isn’t a good idea for about a million reasons. And of course, it’s also not how you do things.” Will eyed Hannibal appreciatively, letting him know it was time. He wanted to do this and do it with Hannibal’s help.

“No, it is not my preference nor is it generally the wisest course of action to give in to impulsivity, but sometimes a situation calls for it. I certainly have had to deliver an untimely end to many at an unexpected juncture when I would have preferred to wait but could not risk it.” Hannibal massaged gentle circles into the space between Will’s spine and shoulder blade.

As soon as he said it, Will couldn’t help but think of Beverly being trapped by Hannibal before her own untimely end. They had never talked about it. Will didn’t really want to know the details. Beverly had been the closest thing he really had to a friend during his time at the FBI. There was Alana and Jack of course, but their relationships were always fraught with complications: power dynamics and manipulation where he and Jack were concerned and a mixture of unrequited feelings and wavering trust with Alana. Beverly didn’t come with any baggage, just an audacious spunk that allowed her to plow through Will’s barriers and attempts to reject all social contact. She wasn’t put off by him, and she never stopped offering her support no matter how fucked up things got in the end. He was always grateful to her for that and deeply regretted missing the chance to accept her friendship.

Something told him he had missed a golden opportunity there, and now he would never really know what could have been. However, it wasn’t a death he really blamed Hannibal for. It was completely necessary and unavoidable for him. He couldn’t let her go once she had seen whatever evidence she found via Will’s urging, but still Will wondered if it bothered Hannibal to kill someone like her. Someone who wasn’t a stomach-turning man like Hamish. It made Will realize why Hannibal had asked him what he would do if Jack or Alana found them now. It was an important question.

“Well, I think I know what kind of end I want for Mr. Hamish Ritchie and just how I want to go about bringing that ending. You were right. Free rage rude is the best food.” Will squared his shoulders and felt a calm steel flowing through his veins like ice water as the beginning strands of an idea shot through the synapses of his brain and wove together like a spider web, sticky and durable and designed to ensnare a very specific prey.

Hannibal didn’t bother trying to conceal his smile as he pulled Will to his chest, hugging him tightly as he combed his fingers through Will’s hair. Perhaps he hadn’t been too hasty to judge in the case of Mr. Hamish Ritchie after all.

Chapter End Notes

I accidentally deleted the end note that was here, and I have zero recollection of what was here other than a promise that the "gift" from IDKICBLT is happening, and I hope more than two people were waiting for the sequel? So yeah...Will's gift to Hanni forthcoming down the road and thanks to all who are returning readers and a big welcome to all who are new. :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

whew At long last, I've had time to get back to this fic. Sorry for the delay. Life has been hectic, but I have another chapter all beta-ed and ready to go after this so at least I'll have another regular update next week no matter what. :)

A hearty thank you to @castellomargot for beta-ing, and I hope you all enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

a few weeks earlier

After Hannibal and Will had gotten into their stolen car to leave behind the cozy comfort of Hannibal's cabin forever, they had driven to Hampton Beach State Park at the coastal edge of New Hampshire to abandon the car in the wee hours of the morning. It took all of three and a half hours to get there, and that included a late night trip to a twenty-four hour grocery store to gather any last-minute supplies and sustenance they needed.

Will almost lamented the brevity of it. It was nice to be embarking on a car trip with Hannibal wherein Will was neither unconscious nor sweating and delirious from encephalitis. It made him think about all the things he wanted to experience with Hannibal, and he was a little disappointed to not have the opportunity to learn what the genteel foreign man was like on an extended road trip where he would have to contend with seedy rest stops and less than stellar culinary options. Will imagined a surly Hannibal accosting a gas station coffee or a fast food burger as though it were a sentient being who must answer for its crimes against the palate and humanity itself, and he chuckled under his breath as they pulled into the campground. At least he'd gotten to see him scoff at the quality of the produce in the grocery store, preternaturally honed sense of smell going off like an alarm as he sniffed an offensive, out-of-season peach.

It was an ideal spot to leave the car as it would take several days for anyone to assume it had been abandoned, and the harbor was a manageable walk away. It was a bit too early for their meeting and maybe *late* enough that they would potentially run into some disreputable characters at the dock that it would do well for them to avoid. They parked and exited to take Winston out to stretch his legs. They walked about half a mile in the dark, Hannibal's thoughts drifting back to when he had last stood in the predawn hours and thought about what it would be like to have Will alongside him. His smile was swallowed by the blackness of the night as he listened to the sound of the ocean lapping against the rocks in the distance. They circled back, and Will tied Winston's leash to a sturdy low-hanging tree branch, taking care to give him enough slack to explore a little. Normally he wouldn't have even taken that precaution, but he wasn't sure how Winston was handling all the sudden changes of scenery and didn't want to risk him running off and getting lost.

“What time is it?”

Hannibal gave an elegant flick of the wrist to move his shirt cuff out of the way and looked down at his watch.

“Almost 2:30.”

Will leaned against the car and swept his eyes over the terrain. It wasn’t a state park to his satisfaction by any means. Less of an insular forest environment to curl up in isolated introspection and more of a beach with some lackluster grassy scenery attached to it. He was grateful that it was still too early in the spring for families to start flocking there in great numbers. He thought about painfully middling nuclear families (surveys always indicating that ridiculous average of 2.5 kids) arriving in droves with tacky plastic foldout lawn chairs and children with cherubic cheeks stained with sticky treats tucked under their arms, and he almost winced at the banality of it all. It made him wonder how hard it had been for Hannibal to suppress his true nature in the company of others and feign interest in their inane lives day after day, year after year. Something about it made Will a little sick, as though it wasn’t fair for these mere mortals to sit in ignorance among him. Will found he had some previously unknown desire for people like that to know what greatness they were standing in the presence of and to quake with the proper fear and veneration Hannibal was due. He was aware this feeling was also highly abnormal and suspect, but he was so many highway markers past normal at this point that he didn't question it as much as he would have years ago.

“I guess we have a little time to kill. You know…” Will threw back a glance at the interior of the back seat and slowly, seductively returned his eyes to Hannibal. “I’ve never had sex in a car. I was too awkward and standoffish of a teenager to make much sexual progress, and by the time I really *did*, I was old enough to have apartments with real beds.”

Hannibal put his hands in his pockets and sauntered over until he was close enough for Will to feel his breath tickling his cheek.

“What exactly is it you are suggesting, Will?”

“Fuck me in the backseat of this car.”

“It would not be very prudent to leave DNA evidence on a stolen vehicle with which we have already been lucky enough to avoid association. Do not spit in the face of fortune when it has smiled upon you.” Despite his protests of practicality, Hannibal’s eyes were sparkling with delight at Will’s assertiveness.

Will leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Hannibal’s waist, chin resting on his shoulder.

“There’s no evidence if you come inside me,” Will whispered as his tongue flitted over Hannibal’s earlobe.

“So vulgar.” Will could feel Hannibal shudder ever so slightly against him.

“You love it when I’m vulgar and commanding.” Will leaned back to smirk at him.

Hannibal only nodded, looking dazed as his eyes greedily flowed over Will’s body.

“You really are doomed by me, aren’t you?” Will’s breath quickened in awe at the truth of this.

“Enthralled like a naïve lamb to the slaughter.” Hannibal swallowed, thoroughly entranced by the man before him and accepting of his fate.

“You’re not naïve. We both know what we’re getting.”

Hannibal nodded again and affectionately tucked a few curls behind Will’s ear.

“Why have you been so quiet today?”

Hannibal took a deep breath and exhaled slowly before opening his mouth to answer.

“I find myself lacking for proper semantics in this moment. We are on the cusp of the final stage in this transition, standing in the space just before the summit of the mountain, and the surreal filter through which my eyes are witnessing it is hard to describe with precision. I fear I may fail if I attempt to do so. I would rather not taint this profound feeling with unwieldy efforts to fill the silence with meaningless conversation.”

“That's when you know you've found somebody special. When you can just shut the fuck up for a minute and comfortably enjoy the silence,” Will quoted and smiled at Hannibal, a hand rising to play with the hair at the nape of his neck.

“Quite. Desultory small talk is a compulsion far too many people are overcome by when confronted with a lull in conversation. I know you find it as tiresome of a behavior as I do.” Hannibal leaned in and planted a soft kiss on Will’s lips.

Will laughed against his mouth, and Hannibal pulled back with a confused look.

“It’s from *Pulp Fiction*, Hannibal. I wonder how often I could quote movies and trick you into attributing all their wisdom to me.”

“I view films from time to time, Will,” Hannibal said with no hint of sarcasm.

Will tilted his head in disbelief.

“I eat, I sleep, I consume entertainment just like anyone else,” Hannibal reaffirmed.

“The just like anyone else bit is pretty debatable there, my cannibal friend, but I’ll bite. Pun intended. What *do* you watch?”

“Dreyer, Bergman, Hitchcock, to name a few,” Hannibal elaborated.

“Of course,” Will gently taunted, smiling as he squeezed Hannibal’s hips.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Hannibal smiled back as he playfully pushed Will against the car.

“Just that you’re a tad predictable in your highbrow tastes. Never forget it was how Alana found you for Mason.”

“Trust that I haven’t,” Hannibal declared darkly.

“Sorry, I wasn’t trying to scold you. I *like* your grandiose tastes. They make you *you*. I would gladly watch *The Passion of Joan of Arc* or *Rope* with you any night. Just know that it means I will be forcing some ghastly modern cinema on you at some point to make this an equal exchange.” At “ghastly,” Will slipped into a mimicry of an appalled member of the British gentry à la Jane Austen, and Hannibal looked about ten different kinds of annoyed.

“I will refrain from imagining what cinematic horrors you will foist upon me lest I be overcome with revulsion before it has even begun.” He still looked mildly irked, but as usual he was more amused than anything else. Will knew Hannibal loved his teasing even when he was pretending he didn’t. *Especially* when he was pretending he didn’t.

“Alright, maybe we should head down and wait for this mysterious boat owner I’m definitely not 100% nervous about trusting to not recognize you and immediately turn us in. Are you sure he’ll even be there? You gave him such short notice. You also pointedly gave *me* very few details about him or the boat.” Will's speech was a little manic with frayed nerves. He shifted in an attempt to walk away from the car, but Hannibal pinned him in place.

“It’s still too early, and yes, I assure you he is a punctual person. The concealed details, as I have already explained, are being kept that way to enable you to be pleasantly surprised… Now if you are quite finished with the anxiety spiral, I believe I owe you the fulfillment of a missed milestone from your adolescence?” Hannibal kissed him deeply and practically shoved him into the car door in his insistence.

Will broke the kiss to open the door and clumsily crawl inside, embarrassment falling down his face like a shroud as soon as Hannibal joined him.

"This is so stupid. I'm already regretting this suggestion. Let's just - "

His words were swallowed by Hannibal's tongue in his mouth as his hands made quick work of zippers and buttons, undressing Will as fast as possible. Shirt and pants both now undone and hanging open, Will groped with blind fingers to do the same to Hannibal but was interrupted by the older man forcefully pulling him onto his lap. Will let out a little yelp of surprise as he landed with his knees on either side of Hannibal's thighs, Hannibal's back flush against the seat. Hannibal curled a hand in Will's hair and pulled his head to the side, exposing his neck to suck marks along the length of it that made Will gasp and buck his hips against Hannibal's growing erection.

"Sometimes I wonder if all of these things really were dormant preferences or if I only like them now because it's you doing it," Will laughed softly, eyes at half-mast as he unbuttoned Hannibal's shirt and continued to lazily grind into his lap.

"I would argue that applies to a great many things more than sex where we're concerned." Hannibal smiled thoughtfully and gazed at Will like he was witnessing something inconceivable. No one but Hannibal had ever looked at Will like that, and the younger man desperately hoped it was something he would continue to do until the end of their days.

Will toed off his shoes and finished removing his underwear and pants, chucking them to the floorboards. He bumped his head on the roof of the car in the process and started chuckling quietly, struck again by how silly it was to be doing this. As he moved back to straddle Hannibal, Will noticed him removing a bottle of lube from his pants' pocket.

"You're just going to carry lube with you at all times now, aren't you? So desperate to be able to have me at a moment's notice." Will smiled as he nipped at Hannibal's ear.

"Those who reside in glass houses should not throw stones, dear Will," Hannibal whispered as he stroked Will with a newly slickened finger, circling and applying pressure but not pushing in just yet. Will squirmed impatiently.

"Stop teasing and fuck me," Will murmured as he trailed his lips down Hannibal's neck.

"Urgency has its place in passion and while it may seem a romantic option to you, trust me when I say it would cause you undue harm right now." Hannibal closed his eyes and stretched his neck to bid Will's mouth to explore further as he finally pushed a finger inside him.

"Maybe I want it to hurt." Will grazed his teeth against Hannibal's pulse and scraped lightly down to his collarbone.

"There are much safer ways I can hurt you." Hannibal's expression contradicted his words. Will could tell from the way his eyes narrowed and sharpened that Hannibal was excited by the prospected of letting go of his control. Will decided not to push the issue though. Somehow he didn't think a cramped backseat could accommodate a fully unleashed Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal pulled Will back by the hair and brought his teeth down hard on the space between Will's shoulder and neck to prove his point, almost breaking the skin as he began to suck. His mouth came off with a wet pop, and Will moaned his approval.

"Another finger, please," Will breathlessly begged as he gathered fistfuls of Hannibal's shirt, fingers curling and releasing the fabric as his hips involuntarily chased more contact. Hannibal obliged and slipped a second finger inside, pumping both in and out faster as he opened him up. Will was so relaxed and full of *need*, skin overtaken with a beautiful, rosy flush as his breath came out more ragged and urgent by the second, that it didn't take long until he was ready and Hannibal's fingers were slipping in with no resistance. "Hannibal, *please*."

"Hmm, what might you be entreating me for, my love?" Hannibal smirked as he raised Will's chin with his free hand.

"You're such an asshole," Will laughed, thrusting his hips insistently onto Hannibal's fingers. "Get inside me before I smack that self-satisfied look off your face. Is that an explicit enough

instruction for you?”

Hannibal’s grin widened as he carefully removed his fingers and unfastened his pants. Will lifted his hips a few inches so Hannibal could shove his pants down around his ankles. Dark, amber eyes sparkling with hunger, Hannibal slicked his erection with lube before gently placing his hands around the back of Will’s thighs to ease him forward. Fumbling at first to get the positioning right and avoid any more mishaps with the ceiling, Will lined himself up and, gripping Hannibal’s engorged cock, began to sink down. He winced as the head breached him a little too quickly.

“Take your time, Will,” Hannibal whispered in that smoky tone that always calmed Will’s nerves. He stroked up and down his lover’s arms with warm, reassuring hands, letting Will slowly take in his length without urging him along.

Will drew in a harsh breath as he felt Hannibal hilt deep inside him, taking a moment to adjust to the new angle.

“Fuck…It feels really deep like this, so…I feel so…” *Full and stretched and filled with just you, you, you.* Will sighed contentedly and leaned his forehead against Hannibal’s, palms resting on the defined muscles of his chest. Tentatively, he rocked his hips forward. “*Oh*.”

Hannibal curled his fingers around Will’s throat, just resting without squeezing, and leaned his head back to watch him with rapt, glittering eyes. Will blushed at the sudden, intense eye contact and moved again, settling into a gentle, undulating rhythm not unlike the lapping waves of the ocean not far from the car. Hannibal was still staring at him like he was a god among men.

"You like watching me ride you?" Will's embarrassment suddenly morphed into an acute sense of power as he rolled his hips in steady, exaggerated circles, completely aware of Hannibal watching his every movement.

"It is an incomparably beautiful sight, you taking what you want from me. Unafraid and unashamed anymore to seize that which you crave. In all aspects." Hannibal's hands glided down Will's back, shedding the shirt from his shoulders and cradling the small of his back to feel the muscles move and contract with every motion of his hips.

Will picked up speed and switched from moving back and forth to sliding up and down Hannibal's cock, his strong thighs rippling and flexing as he pushed up and came back down harder every time. He moaned when he finally angled his body the right way to hit that perfect spot inside him. Hannibal took note and, grasping his hips with firm hands, began to move Will's body up and down on his length. Will slackened and let himself be maneuvered like a toy. Displays of Hannibal's strength never failed to make his whole body feverish with want. It was oddly freeing to just let go, to empty his mind and only have space for *this*, Hannibal's pleasure and his own.

"God, that feels good. You - " Will's train of thought was interrupted by Hannibal fisting his swollen cock right as he made a particularly brutal thrust that was absolute perfection. "*Fuck. Please keep doing that*."

"Do you know why you like this?" Hannibal leaned in to fill Will's ear with his husky murmurs as his grip tightened, one hand pumping Will's cock ever closer to orgasm as the other held him in place while he fucked into him. "You don't have to think, only feel. Only let the sensations wash over you like a cleansing rain. No need for control or rationality, just this moment and this moment alone as everything recedes into the distance like a dream forgotten upon waking."

"Do you ever stop analyzing?" Will squeezed his eyes shut, panting and gasping as he felt himself almost on the edge, Hannibal's insistent cock pummeling his prostate as his fingers slid up and down his leaking erection. "But you're annoyingly right as usual. I like that you can pick me up and slam me back down so easily. It's ridiculously hot, okay?" The last few words came out in a breathless whine as his whole body tensed up. Sensing that he was so close, Hannibal threaded his arm around Will's shoulders and pulled him nearer to claim his mouth in an ardent kiss. Hannibal chewed and sucked on his lower lip, and Will came with a loud groan as he held onto Hannibal's shoulders for dear life.

Hannibal slowly raised his fingers to his mouth and licked them clean, eyes reverently closed as he let Will's taste coat his tongue.

A small noise that was half a laugh and half a whimper left Will's throat.

"Can't leave any evidence behind," he joked, pleasantly overwhelmed.

"Merely an added bonus. I immensely enjoy tasting you at every presented opportunity."

"I like tasting you too." Will started to rock back and forth again, emerging from his post-orgasmic haze to make sure Hannibal would join him in it soon. He idly wondered what it would be like to taste Hannibal's blood, to bite down until the flesh yielded under his teeth and perforated to incite beautiful, bright red trickling streams down his neck and chest. What it would be like to taste coppery sweetness on his tongue, to paint streaks down Hannibal's muscles with clawing fingers as if to mark him for love and for war, tracing oaths in his skin and licking them away until they were memories that could only be revealed by the right eye, like writing with invisible ink. He was vaguely aware that the thought should scare him yet he knew in his heart, as clearly as he now knew what kind of man and beast he was, that Hannibal would only be spurred on by Will sharing this fantasy, would only beg for him to bite even harder as he felt Will's incisors puncturing the skin. "What do I taste like?"

"Like the nectar of forbidden gardens."

"Somehow I doubt that," Will chuckled and bucked his hips to meet Hannibal's thrusts. "If only people knew what a hopeless romantic the Chesapeake Ripper is."

Their shared rhythm became more erratic and frenzied as Hannibal chased his release and Will coaxed it closer with every driving movement of his body, thinking about his own form as nothing more than a tool to make Hannibal come right now. The thought made him feel full and warm. When he felt the telltale clench of the older man's muscles beneath him, the tension in his belly as he clutched Will with eager, bruising fingers, Will crashed his mouth against Hannibal to swallow his moans, probing tongue trying to draw out every syllable and own it, taste it, feel the shape of it in his own mouth. Will felt Hannibal's cock jerking inside

him as he came, a low moan escaping his lips as they broke the kiss to look at each other, panting and sweating as they both came down.

“I doubt any high school back-of-the-car sex I missed out on would have been this good,” Will sighed happily and leaned his forehead against Hannibal’s shoulder. He was trembling, his whole body rippling with pleasant little shudders of overstimulation.

“I wager that had you lived a thousand versions of your formative years, no one would ever have been able to please and reduce you to a quivering bundle of raw nerves quite like I can.”

Will didn’t have to look to know Hannibal was wearing an arrogant grin.

“We’re going to have to work on keeping that ego in check, Doctor Lecter. You’ve read enough Greek mythology to know what happens.”

“Does it ease the severity of my karmic repercussions if I note that the complementary statement is true as well?” Hannibal lifted Will’s chin so they were eye to eye. “No one ever has nor ever will be able to deliver the ecstasy you can with nothing more than a chaste brush of your lips.”

“How fucked up is it that I'm jealous of everyone who has gotten to see you this like…touch you like this…without knowing what they had, what they were seeing. They didn’t *know* you, couldn’t have appreciated everything you are like I do.” Will stroked the sides of Hannibal’s face, thumbs running the length of his jaw. Hannibal’s cock was softening inside him, but he didn’t want to move from the warmth of his lap just yet.

“Considering I want to kill anyone who even attempts to look at you, I am not certain I am the barometer by which you should judge how misguided that line of thinking is or isn’t,” Hannibal smiled lovingly and traced a delicate finger along the scar on Will’s forehead before passing over the puckered pink flesh of the newly formed one on his cheek.

“Tell me,” Will practically purred the request.

“I was jealous of your wife. I would go back to finish Dolarhyde's aborted job now if it weren't such a careless, amateurish risk to take and if I didn't think you would resent me forever for doing so. She got to see how you looked in the morning with the sun peeking in through the blinds to dance across the curves of your cheeks before you woke, your wind-chafed face as you came in from the cold with the dogs, warming your hands by the fire, all the secret seemingly insignificant daily habits one develops that are as unique and unchanging throughout our lives as fingerprints. They can only be witnessed when one enters that comfortable lull of domesticity for they are aspects we seek to hide and keep confined to the relaxed walls of our homes. It is often thought of as part of the mundane, the predictability that causes one to abandon the familiar in favor of seeking the thrill and spark that ignites when meeting someone new, but I have never viewed it that way. There is something so wholly intimate about coming to know someone in this way, and it is an irreplaceable intimacy many take for granted.”

“Hannibal…” Back at the cabin, Will had heard him confess to being envious of Molly, but it had been on Hannibal’s terms, which is to say cagey and careful to avoid any direct

admittance. Hearing it like this was completely different. He felt his eyes welling up as he cradled his partner's face in his hands. "She might have gotten those things, but she didn't get all of me. No one ever has but you. And you get *everything* now. Always."

Will wasn't sure who he had been expecting to be waiting for them at the dock, but it wasn't a kindly old man sporting bifocals and a cardigan that was probably unearthed from a cedar chest belonging to Mister Rogers.

"Good morning, Mr. McNeil. I am Patrick, and this is Elijah. Nice to finally make your acquaintance. I hope we did not keep you waiting very long. Also, I must apologize for requesting to meet at such an hour, but we are adhering to a rather strict timeline at the moment." Hannibal smiled warmly at the man, the Lecter charm turned on to full capacity.

"Please young man, call me Nolan." The elderly man extended a hand and gave Hannibal's a firm shake. "I don't stay asleep past five much these days," His eyes flitted back and forth between Will and Hannibal, "which is something both of you have to look forward to when you're my age by the way, but it means I would already be about just whiling away the hours at home right now. No atonement necessary. So Elijah, I'm told you know your way around one of these pretty well?"

Too preoccupied with nerves about meeting the seller (Will wondered if there was an opposing effect to cabin fever that caused you to actually dread rejoining society because he was suddenly completely unprepared to interact with anyone but Hannibal), Will hadn't even noticed the remarkable sailboat behind him. Turning around to the area of the harbor to which Nolan was pointing, Will found himself face to face with a Morgan Out Island 36 sailboat. His jaw dropped, and he was sure he was going to have to stoop down to physically scoop it up for later reattachment. Hannibal was clearly pleased that his gift had achieved the desired effect. He exchanged delighted looks with Nolan as Will took in the sight of the boat.

"Wow…I…they didn't even make these for more than a few years…I…" Will struggled to force his mouth to form words, the whys and hows and a mixture of incredulity and joy twisting his tongue into stuttering silence.

"Quite an eye you have there, Elijah. You're absolutely right. This is a 1973. They don't make them like this anymore. I've kept it in good working order for a long, long time, but I'm afraid my wanderlust days are long over. Hate to part with it, but it has to be done." Mr. McNeil looked wistful, but he was also keenly observing Will's excitement. It seemed to put him at ease a little.

“It’s in beautiful condition from what I can tell. Can I go onboard and take a look?” Will bounced on the balls of his feet minutely, clearly itching to explore the vessel.

“Of course. If it’s going to be yours, you’ll need to take a gander first.”

“Do you mind watching Winston for a second? I’d like to take Patrick on with me.” It was strange to be calling Hannibal by an alias. Will was glad to know he would have at least a couple weeks before he had to try it out on any strangers again.

“Gladly. I was going to ask who this little guy was. They didn’t introduce you like a proper gentleman, did they?” Nolan bent down to pat Winston’s head, and the dog nosed into his hand.

“Thanks. We’ll just be a minute.” Will smiled and shook his head. *This guy is a goddamn caricature, a Rockwell painting. He can’t be real.*

Bracing himself on the standing rigging, Will carefully climbed on board and held his hand out for Hannibal to take. He went straight to the cockpit, and Hannibal hung back as Will examined the controls, intently watching as Will unwrapped his gift with the barely contained excitement of a kid on Christmas.

“He really upgraded this nicely. GPS and a chart plotter. Definitely fancier than what I had when I went to find you.”

“More extravagant or simply less unnecessary risk?” An amused noise escaped Hannibal’s mouth as he ambled closer.

“My, how the tables have turned. Now who is angling whom to join the twenty-first century?” Will smirked and reached for Hannibal’s hand. “Come on, let’s go look at the cabin. Have to make sure you can deal with me in these quarters for a couple weeks.”

“I am confident that I can deal with you anywhere.”

“Charming of you to say, but you might feel differently after ten days on a vehicle that’s constantly in motion and only about forty feet lo – ” Will stopped as he ducked into the galley. The countertops were pristine and maybe only a few years old, and the fold-out wooden dining table was pretty amply sized and surrounded by a seating area with newer, crisp white upholstery. He could see into the open stateroom to note that it was also clearly renovated. “God, this boat is beautiful. He upgraded everything here too. Not that the 70s interior decorating schemes weren’t without their kitschy charms, but some of them are so hideous you’ll end up wondering if you’re seasick or if it’s just the wood paneling and polyester stateroom that’s inducing the nausea and vomiting.”

Hannibal chuckled and put his arms around Will’s waist from behind. He leaned in to plant a soft kiss on his neck.

“I believe I have already deduced the answer to this question, but what do you think?”

“It’s perfect. It’s…you didn’t go for something that suits *your* tastes. This is a boat for me. The construction is immaculate, this guy clearly excelled at upkeep, and while it’s definitely not a cheap boat by any means, it’s not some ridiculously overstated yacht I would feel like an imposter in. Practical but elegant. Perfect compromise.” Will was grinning from ear to ear. He twisted around in Hannibal’s arms to kiss him. “I don’t know how to thank you for this. This is amazing.”

“Joining you in this oceanic odyssey will be reward enough. I quite like the idea of it, you in your element at the helm of mankind’s most ancient form of vessel, wielding the terrible destructive power of the waves and becoming their master as you command them to propel us to our destination. It is a compelling, lyrical image; you conquering the waters so soon after our descent into their jaws.”

“Or you could just admit that you think it’s sexy.” Will kissed him again and backed him into the galley counter.

“I believe I just did,” Hannibal murmured against Will’s lips. “Let us adjourn this for now though lest we give poor Nolan a heart attack.”

Will laughed and gave him one last quick peck on the lips.

“Where did you even find him?!”

“Remember the myopic farmers from the produce stand near the cabin? They have myopic friends.”

“Of course.”

They made their way back to the dock and found Mr. McNeil sitting in a chair with Winston’s head resting on his knee.

“Everything kosher, boys?”

“Yeah, it’s a gorgeous boat, Nolan. I feel honored to own it. By the way, do you know where we can pick up some supplies before we – ”

“All taken care of.” Nolan held up his hand.

“I…” Will gave him a puzzled look.

“I gave him the list you compiled for me, and for an extra fee, he outfitted it to your specifications.”

“Han…” Will caught himself and took a breath. “*Patrick*…that’s – ”

“Damn thoughtful.” The elderly man interjected. “He’s a generous man, that one. Pretty persuasive too. Would do you well to hang onto him.”

“Yeah…he is certainly both of those things. And I will.” Will grinned at Hannibal a second before turning back to Nolan. It was hilarious to imagine this sweet old man corresponding

with a formal, well-spoken Hannibal and being none the wiser about who he was really dealing with. To him, Hannibal was just a polite guy with extra money to lavish on Will. “I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

“Don’t you worry, son. He made it well worth my while. Got everything you need for this little furry nugget here too. He reminds me of my Sandy. She came with me on every boat trip in the 80s. Loved the open water every bit as much as I did.” He rose slowly from his chair and patted Winston’s fuzzy head. “Well, I should be heading back. Haven’t had the morning coffee ritual yet. Bon voyage, boys. And do be careful out there. Lord knows the ocean is about the most unpredictable beast that exists.”

“I sincerely thank you for everything, Nolan. We will.” Hannibal reached out to shake his hand once more, and then it was time. Nothing left to do but finally pull away from the shore and drift ever further into the blue abyss.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, from now on I make no promises about when things will happen in a fic because holy bejeesus, this pairing just always takes on a life of its own. So sorry that car sex and conversations (and boat sex and more conversations in the next chapter) have delayed a certain scene. Just know that it DOES exist and you will see it. :)

Oh and if things seem a little *too* perfect and like they've been going according to plan a little *too* smoothly for these two, you're not wrong...for now...*cackles maniacally and disappears into the ether*

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> It's the last day of #bottomHannibalweek, and luckily this is a very appropriate chapter for that! Comments and kudos give me life and motivation so let me know your thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They had been clipping along at a brisk but steady pace for the past three days, averaging about 250 nautical miles a day. The wind was forgiving and reliable, billowing the sails at a very desirable speed of 8-10 knots with barely any fluctuation, but Will knew that wouldn't last forever. He was checking the weather several times a day, aware that the open water was the most meteorologically mercurial of places.

Although in many ways this was the place he felt most at peace and sure of himself, Will was fighting a stirring sense of unrest that kept him fending off Hannibal's pleas of anchoring the boat for a while so he could sleep properly instead of in short, irregular bursts. He refused to use the autopilot and leave it unattended for any significant stretches, preferring to tame and harness the energy of the waves with his own hands on the steering wheel, the sense of control much more real and reassuring when he felt the grip of his knuckles around its smooth metal surface.

"You're yawning." Hannibal sat on the left side of the built-in bench of the cockpit and stretched an arm around the back of it. He crossed his legs and leaned back, exuding the look of some affluent patriarch of an old money family with a summer house in the Cape. Clad in a tan colored plaid linen suit with a single pleat down the front of the trousers and a crisp white button down underneath, he was the picture of elegance as usual. He only needed a crystal tumbler of scotch and an overbearing sense of waspy judgment with impossible standards for some hypothetical offspring to complete the image. The one sign of informality was his bare feet, at which Will kept sneaking glances. It was completely unfair that even his feet were attractive, gracefully sloped high arches and nary a callous in sight.

Winston hopped down next to Hannibal, gave his life jacket a scratch with a back foot, and did a circle on the bench before settling into a neat pile of shaggy fur. His head leaned against Hannibal's thigh, and the man idly combed a hand through the soft fur on the back of his neck. They were beginning to adjust to each other, and although Hannibal had grumbled a few protests about dog hair and close quarters, Will would catch him feeding extra bits of food to Winston and patting his head with murmurs of praise when he thought Will wasn't paying attention.

"I'm fine. I'll take a break in a couple hours." Will didn't turn to look at him. He kept his focus on the vast expanse of blue and foamy white. The sun was beginning to wane and

would be fully set in two or three hours.

Hannibal leaned his head on his fist and regarded Will in silence, trying to work out the best approach. He stood up and placed a hand around Will's right shoulder. The older man gave it a squeeze before running his palm down the length of his back and linking his arms around his lover's waist.

"We're three days out to sea. They cannot catch us. Not right now. No one is lying in wait in the middle of the Atlantic to apprehend us, only the fearsome creatures of the sea and an endless, wondrous ocean. You are letting this experience pass you by. We are in no hurry; we have no deadline for arrival. I made sure to rent the villa enough in advance that should we be earlier or later than anticipated, it will not affect our arrangements. Put the autopilot on, take a moment to relax, and I'll make us some dinner." Hannibal kissed the edge of Will's ear and felt some of the tension leave his body, his limbs loose in Hannibal's arms as he nodded.

"I'm sorry. It's like I can't believe we really did it. I know they could still find us later, and I'm sure I'll resume looking over my shoulder incessantly when we land. But right now…it really is just you and me and Winston for at least a couple weeks. It feels impossible." Will made the necessary adjustments on the controls as he spoke and turned around in Hannibal's grip. He apologetically kissed his forehead and then his lips. "Mind if I lie down for a bit while you cook?"

"Not at all. I will wake you when it's ready." Hannibal smiled and brushed Will's hair back from his forehead before turning around to head to the galley.

Will followed and called to Winston to join him below deck.

Hannibal woke Will with the gentlest shake and a kiss on the cheek.

"Dinner is ready, dear Will."

Will smiled, his sleepy eyes fluttering open and closed.

"You always look rather cherubic upon waking. A Botticelli come to life."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Hannibal."

"When you are the recipient, my compliments are always delivered with the utmost sincerity."

Will stared into the gold-flecked irises looking back at him.

"You know, on the surface we have a real opposite-side-of-the-tracks romance. Cultured, sophisticated psychiatrist who enjoys opera and imported truffle oil that costs more than a

week’s worth of groceries falls for grubby outdoorsman with a wardrobe that probably costs a whopping fifty dollars total.”

“One must exclude all the cannibalism, murder, and mutilation of course.” Hannibal smiled and stroked the side of Will’s face before rising from where he was crouched next to the bed.

“Well, I did say *on the surface*,” Will said as he sat up, rubbing his eyes groggily.

The cabin was filled with enticing smells, and Will’s stomach growled at the thought of what he knew would be an exceptional meal. He trailed behind Hannibal to the galley. On opposing sides of the table were two plates of eggs scrambled with chives, onions, and smoked salmon with a smattering of crumbled goat cheese sprinkled on top. It was garnished with a lemon wedge and fresh tomato slices.

Will had tried to discourage the purchase of too much easily perishable food, but Hannibal had insisted. "Let me spoil you before we have been removed from land for so long that we must succumb to the consumption of canned food. It may only seem like putting off the inevitable to you, but I find it to be a worthwhile pursuit. This will last for at least a few days and maybe even as much as a week." Will had sighed resignedly and nodded in agreement. He was glad for that decision now as he gratefully wolfed down the meal.

"Delicious as always. Thank you for feeding me. I didn't realize how hungry I was."

"Yes, you have been known to fail to take proper care of yourself when it comes to the most basic of needs. I fear were it not for me, you would doomed to a life of fast food with intermittent periods of starvation." Hannibal smirked as he brought a forkful of eggs to his mouth.

"Oh come on! I'm not that bad," Will protested in-between bites.

"Need I remind you of the abominable casserole incident?" Hannibal quirked a judgmental eyebrow, and Will winced at the memory, knowing he wouldn't win this battle.

Back when he and Hannibal were first becoming friendly, long before any trauma had been inflicted or any life-altering events set into motion, Hannibal had stopped by Wolf Trap to pick up Will for their appointment. Will's car had been in the shop for its annual inspection. Hannibal being Hannibal, he had insisted on coming to collect him when Will called to cancel. When Hannibal arrived at Will's home, he found him scavenging the pantry shelves for something, *anything* substantial enough to form a meal. Save for a can of beans, an assortment of condiments, and a long forgotten jar of peanut butter in the back of the cupboard, the kitchen was empty.

Hannibal had opened the fridge to find the moldy remains of what had been a shoddy casserole to begin with shoved in the back like a shameful secret. Wrinkling his nose in disgust, he had disposed of it in the trash and proposed they cancel their session in favor of adjourning to Hannibal's house for a proper dinner. Will remembered feeling like it was the first time someone had cared about how well fed he was in a long, long time.

After dinner, Will checked the autopilot to make sure they were still on course and submitted to Hannibal's invitation to have a glass of wine on deck as Winston dozed in the cabin below. The sun had fallen from the sky to be replaced with the most brilliant, luminescent moon either of them had ever seen and a broad canvas of glittering stars. They sat next to each other on one side of the cockpit bench, Hannibal's arm around Will and Will's head resting in the crook of it.

"We are in such an infinite place, nature swelling like ripened fruit all around us. There is some equal comfort and terror in knowing it could engulf us. Enfold us in its infernal belly at any moment as we rest in its very focal point."

Will felt the reverberations from Hannibal's chest on the side of his face, a soothing rumble. He traced patterns on Hannibal’s forearm, the lean muscle exposed from his rolled up shirtsleeve.

"I agree. Even now, after almost losing our lives by its hands, I find some strange pacification in the brutality of it. Like it’s a monster who has agreed to give us safe passage through a temporary truce."

"You speak of it like a vengeful god." Hannibal tilted his head in consideration, fingers stroking Will’s hair.

"Isn't it?"

He felt Hannibal's chest shift beneath him as he nodded.

"Yes. Arguably the original god from whence all others were sprung."

Will closed his eyes and pictured Hannibal's naked skin against the backdrop of the onyx sky, his shining eyes backlit from the celestial sparks peppering the night's curtain. He sat up to look him, all the blood rushing down as he thought about what he wanted right now.

"I...I want to rim you. Can I try that?" Will's voice came out shakier than he had hoped.

"Your intonation is less that of a man who wants something and more of one who thinks he should." Hannibal's expression was hard to discern in the darkness, but Will didn't need to see it illuminated to know he was skeptical.

"I'm not sure I do, but I want to try...And I have this image of you out here that I need to see right now." Will's words came out with more resolve this time, and Hannibal nodded.

"How would you like me, Will?" Hannibal crooned, arousal curling the edges of his words.

"Take off your clothes and put your knees on the bench. Face away from me and lean over it."

Hannibal did as he was told without hesitation, never shifting his eyes away from Will as he undressed. Will watched hungrily, the moonlight bouncing off the curves of Hannibal's beautiful body. Will kneeled down at the foot of the bench behind him and assessed the positioning.

"Rest your elbows on the back of it and spread your legs more."

Hannibal complied, and Will sucked in a breath at the sight. The older man looked vulnerable and yet formidable and strong all at once, naked against the stark deep landscape of the ocean.

"Look at me."

Hannibal turned to look over his shoulder, and Will let out a low moan when he saw how shamelessly lustful he looked.

"I wish I had your talent for drawing. I'd love to capture you like this, spread out for me just waiting for my command, arching your back like you know exactly how perfect you look. You're *exquisite*, Hannibal."

Hannibal groaned at that, and Will could see his cock was fully hard now, bumping up against the back of the bench. Will leaned forward and traced the curves of Hannibal's ass with his fingertips, eliciting a shiver and sigh from the older man. Hannibal rocked his ass toward Will involuntarily, and the younger man responded by placing a series of gentle kisses on both cheeks. His tongue darted out to paint wet, warm stripes across the now goosebump-covered flesh.

He stepped back to let Hannibal linger in suspense for a moment before carefully parting his cheeks, a firm hand on each, and giving Hannibal's entrance a slow, tentative lick. Even though the contact was so light, Hannibal shuddered under Will's tongue and let out a breathy moan. The flesh was more delicate and supple than Will had expected. It was warm and while he had been nervous about taste, all he noticed was sweat and a faint trace of soap coupled with the now familiar, intoxicating scent of Hannibal's skin. He felt his own cock coming to life as he dipped back in to deliver a more confident swipe of his tongue.

Will licked long, broad flat strokes against Hannibal's opening, and the moans he was drawing from his lover erased any nerves and encouraged him to keep going. He pulled back and looked up at the taut muscles of Hannibal's back and shoulders.

"Does it feel good?" He knew the answer would be a resounding 'yes' but still needed so badly to hear him say it.

"Perfect," Hannibal praised, peering over his shoulder to look at Will kneeling on the floorboards behind him.

"Tell me how you want me to do it," Will requested in a sultry whisper, the pad of his forefinger teasing Hannibal's entrance.

A low laugh left Hannibal's throat.

"What?" Will asked a little defensively as self-doubt creeped back in.

"I am not laughing at your expense, Will. I am...laughing in disbelief as this is a scenario I have given a great deal of consideration. Not under these exact circumstances of course." In

the darkness, Hannibal almost looked shy as he gazed down at Will.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I have asked so much of you in so many ways that I do not always feel it is my place to ask for anything more." Hannibal sounded a little mournful, and it made Will's chest tighten.

"I *want* you to ask, Hannibal. I want you to tell me what you like. I like fulfilling your desires as much as you like bringing mine to the surface. Don't you know that by now?" Will rose from the floor to kiss Hannibal's shoulder and run his fingers through the hair at the base of his neck. He brought his lips to Hannibal's ear and whispered, commanding and eager, "Now...tell me how to use my tongue until you're so fucking turned on you're begging me to make you come."

Hannibal swallowed audibly and claimed Will's mouth in a fierce kiss. When he broke the kiss, Will could see the shift. Any trace of vulnerability was gone and in its place was that eerily calm, measured look he knew so well. Will felt his skin tingling in anticipation.

“Draw slow, wide circles with your tongue, gradually making them smaller as you go. Then switch to short, quick laps, light at first and then increasing pressure, harder and deeper until you maybe achieve what you set out to do. But I do not have a history of begging easily.” Hannibal sucked Will’s bottom lip into his mouth and nibbled hard enough to almost break the skin.

“Of that, I have no doubt. But you know I like a challenge.” Will flashed him a devilish grin before returning to his knees, a rough hand on Hannibal’s upper back to lean him over the deck again.

Will followed instructions, hot tongue tracing steadily tighter circles around the ring of muscle as he listened for any change in the breathy noises coming from Hannibal. When he switched to little staccato licks, pressing in ever harder against the soft skin, the sighs turned to gasps and Will noticed the tension in Hannibal’s forearms as he tried to resist collapsing forward. Will’s cock strained more painfully against his pants with every beautiful sound Hannibal made, emboldening him to keep going, making Hannibal’s entrance wetter and wetter. Will hooked his arms around Hannibal’s thighs and yanked him even closer to his mouth, smiling at the sharp exhalation of surprise he got in response. When the tip of his tongue finally entered him, Hannibal’s arms caved and he pressed his cheek against the cool surface of the boat, breathless and full of arousal, his hard cock trapped between his stomach and the deck.

Will tried to remain stoic. He thought maybe he had a better chance of rattling Hannibal if he didn’t give any indication that he was affected by this, but he couldn’t help the moan that escaped when he saw Hannibal fall against the boat. Hannibal bucked against his mouth after Will experimentally sucked on the puckered flesh. Will groaned again before repeating it, desperate to make Hannibal beg and plead. He grazed Hannibal’s balls with the tips of his fingers, a teasing, tickling touch, and plunged his tongue inside him. His knees were starting to quiver on the bench, and Will chased that reaction, licking him like he was something delectable.

“Will…” Hannibal sounded breathless and far away.

Will lathed one long stripe against Hannibal’s opening before kissing his way up his spine. He pressed his chest flat against Hannibal’s back and nibbled on his ear.

“Do you want something, Hannibal?” Will uttered as calmly as he could while he was struggling to suppress his own want. His erection rubbed against Hannibal’s naked ass, and they both gasped at the contact.

Hannibal hesitated and took a deep breath.

“No.” He met Will’s eyes, looking entirely unmoved on the surface, but Will could see what was underneath.

Will ran a forefinger along his entrance, now slick with warm saliva, and pushed inside.

“Mmm are you sure about that?” Will murmured, reaching his other hand down to squeeze a palmful of Hannibal’s ass.

“No.” It came out as more of a ragged breath than a word.

Will thrust his finger in more roughly, and Hannibal scrambled for purchase on something, anything, his groping hands eventually settling on the rigging around the edge of the boat. Will draped his arm around Hannibal’s stomach and pulled him back to free his cock, but he didn’t grasp it. He just delicately trailed a finger along the underside, the finger inside Hannibal still pumping in and out. Without warning, Will removed his finger and stood up, all contact broken.

“Okay…well maybe you can let me know when you make a decision,” Will intoned indifferently, striding away from the deck and toward the cabin. A hand wrapped around his waist so painfully, Will jumped back a little as Hannibal spun him around and crushed his lips in a bruising kiss. When their lips finally parted, they were both panting and piercing each other with dark, hungry eyes.

“I don’t think that was a verbal request, Hannibal. I’m going to need more than that.”

“Take me below deck right this second, and fuck me until I can no longer walk. Is that an explicit enough instruction for you?” Hannibal grinned wickedly, echoing Will’s earlier words.

“I thought you didn’t beg easily,” Will said triumphantly.

“If that is what you consider begging, it appears I have much left to show you.”

“I’m sure you do.” Will clasped Hannibal’s hand and led him past a sleeping Winston (who didn’t stir from his spot underneath the galley table) into the stateroom. Will sat on the bed and started to undress. Hannibal opened a cupboard to retrieve the lube before sauntering over to help him.

“Actually, in all my years of boating experience, I’ve never done this either.” Will laughed and shrugged off his sweater.

“No backseat, adolescent fumbling and no romantic evenings on the water. What *was* your life before you met me, Will Graham?” Hannibal smiled as he helped Will out of his pants.

“Slow, certain death by asphyxiation from an endless source of smothering outside forces,” Will said with a bitter exhale.

Hannibal stopped undressing him and flashed him a shrewd, examining look.

“Sorry. I know that was rhetorical. I’m nothing if not a prize winner in the categories of ‘destroying the mood’ and ‘making it awkward’.” Will shot him a shy, apologetic glance.

“Do they usually hand out those awards as a pair? I would imagine them to be categories that share the same space in the middle of the Venn diagram?” Hannibal pushed Will on his back, climbing on top of him as he bent down to bite his neck.

“Mmm there has been talk of consolidating them. Just one big trophy for the socially impaired.” Will chuckled and moved to flip him onto his back, but Hannibal stilled him with a hand on his wrist.

“Like this.” Hannibal rose to a sitting position, shapely thighs bracketing Will’s hips. “If you do not mind.”

“I extremely don’t mind.” Will huffed out an anticipatory breath. The thought of Hannibal on top of him like this was almost too much.

Hannibal smiled knowingly and leaned forward to hand Will the lube. He stayed like that, sinewy forearms caging Will’s shoulders as he trailed kisses down his neck.

Will slicked two fingers and reached between Hannibal’s legs to circle his entrance, warming the lube against it before pushing inside. Hannibal groaned and lifted his hips a little to give Will a better angle.

He kept covering Will’s ear, neck, cheeks with kisses, and Will noticed something had changed ever so slightly from a minute ago. Hannibal was always worshipful and almost in awe when they made love, but something felt especially reverential about the way he was kissing Will right now, his left hand clutching Will’s shoulder as he breathed sighs into his skin between long, lingering touches of his lips.

“Are you okay, Hannibal?” Will asked softly, stroking his hair.

He paused for a few seconds and let out a slow, long breath.

“I would have stayed with you even if you did not want this. I would have gone without this, content to be by your side for as long as you permitted, no matter the terms.” Even though Hannibal was whispering in Will’s ear, it sounded private and far away. He could have been speaking to himself, uttering secrets alone in the dark.

“But I am glad I do not have to.” His voice trailed off as he pressed his mouth to Will’s neck once more, staying still for a moment, sealing his lips around Will’s pulse as though he could swallow each heartbeat, absorb it into his body until it was his own.

Will felt a lump forming in his throat. He knew it was true, and it made him equal parts happy and melancholy. There was something so beautiful about love that strong, and yet there was a fragility to the way it consumed, the way it fated them both. It reminded him of fire, so powerful and unstoppable as long as fuel remained but so easily snuffed out should the atmosphere turn the tides at the right moment.

“I love you.” Will cupped Hannibal’s cheek and gave him one long, meaningful look before withdrawing his fingers and coating his cock in lube. Hannibal sat up and, locking eyes with him, gripped Will’s erection as he sank down. They breathed a collective sigh of relief when Will was fully inside him. It was Will’s turn to be full of awe now. Watching Hannibal writhe on top of him, muscles contracting and relaxing as he rode him just like Will had only a few days ago, was indescribable. Despite the fact that Hannibal was mostly controlling the movement, this position felt like a gesture of surrender from him in some way. Hannibal’s body was on display in full view, looking so perfect he could have been painstakingly carved from marble, and there was no way for either of them to hide their expressions.

When he twined his fingers with Will’s, the feeling only intensified. Hands clasped together on both sides, Will began to thrust up in time with Hannibal’s movements, neither of them taking their eyes off each other. Will had been too wrapped up in taking in Hannibal’s every reaction to notice the rocking of the boat when they were on deck, but he slowly became aware of it now, grateful for the mild weather. The vessel was moving gently enough to enhance everything instead of disrupting it, something comforting and certain about the reminder of them being carried ever further out to sea as they pressed their bodies together.

Will released one of Hannibal’s hands and wrapped it around his twitching cock. It didn’t take long for him to come, spilling in Will’s hand and on his stomach as he tightened his fingers on the hand Will still held fast, gasping and falling forward to kiss him. Will let out a deep groan as he felt Hannibal’s muscles clench around him. He cupped Hannibal’s ass with both hands and thrust into him a few more times before he was coming too. He loosened his grip and leaned his head back, eyelashes fluttering, sated and spent.

They lay quietly for a moment, neither in a rush to leave the comfort of each other’s arms. Will ran a hand over his eyes as the dizzying thoughts returned much too quickly for his liking, the temporary cessation that their intimacy had granted now coming to an end.

“This galloping return to an anxious state only minutes after it was silenced does not bode well for your state of mind.”

Will only exhaled a slow, whistling breath and didn’t bother to answer.

“Will.” It was a nonnegotiable request so Will relented.

“It feels too easy.”

“What does?”

“Being out here without so much as a hiccup in plans. Being out here without so much as a hiccup in *us*.” Will looked at Hannibal with cautious eyes.

Hannibal rolled onto his back, the smaller sleeping quarters bringing his side flush with the interior wall.

“You should not tempt the Fates by saying such things lest your words waft into their eager, eavesdropping ears.” Hannibal looked inscrutable, and Will couldn’t determine how serious he was.

“Superstitious, Dr. Lecter?” There was a wry twist to Will’s inflection. Hannibal’s tendency to speak of god and fate always amused Will a little. It was poignant and certainly not something he felt like mocking, but there was something funny about a man whose survival had rested so much on careful decisions and concrete details buying into the mystical forces of the universe. But Will supposed Hannibal probably didn’t see it that way and could easily make a convincing case.

“Always and never all at once. While man’s decisions are his own on the surface, things are never really how they seem, are they? Hidden influences and manipulators of the elements are always at work and often their roles are not revealed until we have already made the move on the board that the sirens were surreptitiously calling us toward.” Hannibal folded an arm behind his head and looked at Will with curious eyes, awaiting his response.

“So what does one do then?” Will looked back at him, eyes searching for an answer in those dark pupils. “How do you stay ahead of the elements if they choose to hide their faces in the dark?”

“By taking all possible trajectories into account. By running them through your mind in conscientious detail, leaving nothing to chance, so that you may visualize every option in such minutiae as to construct a visual map of the events in your mind that feels as real and tactile as it would were it actually occurring. And by never underestimating the power of any of these individual forces to turn the course of events with only one minor tweak. Give everything due deference. If not, you may fall victim to its subtle subterfuge.” Hannibal lightly ran his fingers across Will’s collarbone.

“I think I can do that.” Will turned his head and looked at the cabin ceiling with a new determination.

“I know you can. Your imagination is so uniquely vivid that it is renowned. Some might even say notorious.” Hannibal smiled and turned onto his side, draping his arm over Will’s stomach.

Will huffed a short laugh and closed his eyes. Drowsiness was finally winning out over anxiety.

“Will…”

“Mmm…”

“As much as I detest rousing you when it appears that my pleas of proper slumber are finally not falling on deaf ears, should we anchor before retiring for the night?” Hannibal stroked Will’s chest and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Shit…” Will shot upright. “Yeah…let’s do that. You win. I’m exhausted. We’re making admirable time right now anyway.”

After they returned to bed, Will was out so quickly, he didn’t remember falling asleep. He did remember his dreams though. He was back under the water after the cliff fall and clinging to Hannibal, who was bleeding spirals of dark red from his stomach that formed like clouds of sooty smoke. Every time Will put his hand over the bullet wound to stop the bleeding, it gushed in more frightening spurts until all the water surrounding them was an ocean of blood threatening to choke them both. Will woke with a start in the middle of the black night coughing on phantom remnants of Hannibal’s blood, lungs sputtering to expel the afterimages of the nightmare. He struggled to catch his breath, sweaty hands unclenching their iron grip on the sheets.

Hannibal jerked awake at the sound and turned to face him. As soon as he saw the state Will was in, he put a consoling hand on his cheek, careful to leave him enough space to breathe and come back to reality.

“Are you alright, Will?” Hannibal’s voice was soft and husky with sleep as he caressed Will’s cheek.

“Yeah…just a bad dream.” Will tried to take a deep breath that turned into a gulp. He could feel Hannibal’s perceptive eyes on him. Will didn’t want to face that penetrating gaze, but he forced himself to turn toward it. “Really, I’m fine. Just…let me settle in here?” He pointed to the crook of Hannibal’s arm.

“Of course,” Hannibal said warmly as he turned onto his back and folded his arm out next to him.

“Sorry about the sweat,” Will muttered as he curled into Hannibal’s body.

“Shhh.” Hannibal rhythmically ran his hand up and down Will’s back.

It should have been patronizing. He was soothing him the way one would an infant, but instead it just felt like exactly what he needed. He fell back asleep with Hannibal’s fingers on his skin, and the lapping of the waves against the boat in his ears.

When they reached their destination, it was after midnight. The last stretch had been fraught with tempestuous storms that propelled them forward at an unpredictable speed, and he was relieved to see an end to it. Will was equally glad and a little disappointed that the first time

he saw Île Boulay was at this hour. It was incredibly peaceful and quiet, the birds still asleep along with everyone else. But it seemed as though the proper view should be in full sunlight, palm trees swaying in a gentle breeze as the light glinted off the water. On the other hand, it was good to not have to worry about a potentially awkward reception from strangers.

Having borne the brunt of the tricky navigation before the storm broke, Will was exhausted and unsteady on his feet. It felt strange enough to be back on land and walking on solid ground, but the rocky transition was exacerbated by how worn-down he was.

“I am afraid we will have to walk although there should be a car waiting at the house for us for future use. It should be no more than a mile or so. We will take the essentials for now and come back for the rest tomorrow if that sounds agreeable to you.” Hannibal looked a little pale, and Will wondered how well he had handled the tumultuous waves. He had taken Winston below deck during the storm, muttering something offhandedly about avoiding the rain. Will hadn’t been able to devote much of his attention to them as he had his hands full with navigation responsibilities. By the time Hannibal emerged and they docked the boat in the public marina, he realized hadn’t really seen either of them for a few hours. Winston had been cowering in his favorite spot below the galley table when Will had returned to coax him out.

“Sounds good to me. I may collapse on this walk though, and you don’t look like you’re in any particular shape to be carrying me.” Will looked over as they walked, but Hannibal didn’t give any affirmation about this.

About ten minutes later, Hannibal walked to the side of the dirt road with as graceful of a stride as ever and casually vomited.

Will walked over after a moment, rubbed his back, and handed him a bottle of water which he gratefully accepted.

“In all your thorough preparation, you didn’t think to pack Dramamine, did you?” Will teased.

Hannibal nodded and sucked in a big gulp of air.

“Not one to admit weakness, are you?” Will smirked in the dark. “How many times have you thrown up already? If you’d let me known, I would have told you that going below deck is the worst thing to do when you’re seasick.”

“I assure you it was merely an accidental oversight on my part. No pride involved.” Hannibal’s face was mostly obscured by the dark, but Will could see the fiery glint in his eyes. “I didn’t want to bother you with something this trivial while you were guiding us to safety. And I lost count sometime after the third.”

“I’m sorry. Let’s get you to a bed that doesn’t move.” Will linked arms with him and guided him back down the road.

Winston kept stopping along the path to investigate the mysterious new flora with his nose. Suddenly, they were in front of their new house, and Will was mildly concerned that he had

blacked out during the walk. He felt like he blinked, and then they were there despite him recollecting none of the in-between.

He looked around at the expansive yard full of palm trees with a large kapok near the house and a shea tree in the distance. The land to the left was partially fenced in with a dark wood picketed fence, and there was a lovely array of beautiful flowers around the perimeter of it, most of which he couldn't make out that well in the dark. Those that he could see he didn't recognize. There was a mid-sized black car in the dirt drive to the right of the villa.

The house itself had a red very Deco façade with curved windows in the front of the two story house that were accented by long, linear black lines above them. It struck Will as odd at first until he remembered that, yes, of course there would be French architecture in this country.

Hannibal bent down to pick up a potted Cattleya orchid. He lifted the pot and removed the rust colored ceramic drainage bowl to reveal a set of keys. Still slightly wobbly and pale, Hannibal managed to crack a smile anyway as he looked at Will and jingled the keys.

"Ha! The garish fake orchid…except this looks like a vibrant, real one. You're so sentimental." Will laughed and glanced around the property once more. "Unattended car… key left in a very specific plant…these people must have thought you were out of your mind."

"I imagine so. But money tends to silence any forthcoming questions regarding minor eccentricities." Hannibal put one of the keys in the lock, fumbled for a light switch on the wall, and flipped it on.

"Holy shit," Will gasped as he took in the sight of the living room. It was painted a rich, warm, medium red with a white ceiling with classic Deco crown molding, a series of rectangular inlays that bridged the wall to the ceiling in clean lines meeting in the corners. There was a white fireplace composed of the same smooth curves as the walls on the outside of the house, three layers of the same shape laid on top of each other that increased in size as they met the wall, nesting inside each other to create a depth of field. A silver colored metal fixture sat in the center of it, one of those bold geometric shapes that fanned outward in smaller pieces bordering a large, sharp rectangle.

Echoing that fan shape was the clear glass spanning most of one wall with a few feet of opaque wall on all sides. It was set into the wall a few inches, and jutting outward from it were those same rectangular inlays from the ceiling except larger to match the design. Will walked forward and saw that the room the glass looked in on was the dining room. He sat down in one of the plush red velvet chairs on either side of the glass and smiled at Hannibal as he shook his head in disbelief. It was a darker red than the walls so as to coordinate but not look washed out against it.

"You don't like it?" Hannibal smiled back and leaned an elbow on the fireplace.

"I'm flashing back to something about you not forgetting that your oh-so-particular tastes are how Alana found you?" He leaned back and petted Winston's head as the dog walked by him in his quest to examine everything in the room with his inquisitive nose.

“This is not as specific as a purchasing pattern of vintage wine and rare truffles nor is it an easy purchase to track, not only from how I went about it but also from the fact that there are countless rentals in countless countries that appeal to my tastes. It would not be the easiest of markers for the FBI or anyone to hone in on.” Hannibal walked over and sat in the other chair. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“I like it…obviously a bit flashier than I would choose – ”

“I dare say that everything more elaborate than a shack in the woods is too luxurious in your opinion,” Hannibal interrupted with a fond smile.

“My Wolf Trap house was not a shack. Neither was…” *My house with Molly.* Will stopped himself before finishing the sentence.

“I know. Only hyperbolic teasing. I do think you could manage and be content with a much starker version of minimalism than I would prefer though.” Hannibal closed his tired eyes and leaned his head on the back of the chair. “Not that it is entirely without appeal to me.”

“Isolation?” Will followed suit and let his eyelids fall closed and his neck be cradled in velvet.

“Isolation with you,” Hannibal corrected.

A smile slowly crept across Will’s lips.

“Let’s go to bed, Hannibal.”

They slept the sleep of the dead, unfettered by interruptions or unpleasant dreams. When Will woke up, Hannibal was reading in bed next to him, propped up in a sitting position. The headboard his back rested against was the same fanned out shell shape as many of the other geometric accents in the house, a deep obsidian color with bold, linear white piping all along the edges. Will rubbed his bleary eyes and refocused his sleepy gaze, throwing the silver and black patterned comforter that looked like it was plucked right out of Gatsby’s house off his sweaty legs. He looked over at Hannibal who regarded him with a small smile before turning back to his book.

“Are you really reading Cicero first thing in the morning?” Will croaked as he glanced down at the copy of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

Hannibal plucked his watch from the nightstand and returned his eyes to the pages of the volume.

“It’s just after eleven, Will. Hardly first thing. I have been awake for some time.”

Will snuggled against his shoulder and let out a petulant grunt.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You needed to rest. Which reminds me, I do not believe I have properly thanked you for navigating us through the worst of the journey.” Hannibal placed the book on the night stand and drew Will to his chest with a comforting arm. “I am sorry I’m not of more use on the high seas.”

“You’re always of plenty use,” Will murmured with a salacious raise of his eyebrows. He kissed Hannibal’s jaw and then settled his head back on his shoulder. “But speaking of recuperating…how soon can you prep me for surgery, doctor?”

Will felt Hannibal actually *shiver* underneath him, his breath catching in his chest.

“You didn’t think I’d forgotten, did you?” Will raised his head to fix Hannibal with a resolute gaze.

“My beautiful, positively wicked boy,” Hannibal whispered, a hand reaching up to cradle Will’s cheek. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“Nothing…but it isn’t really about ‘deserving’ is it?” Will curled his fingers around the hand on his cheek.

“No…” Hannibal gasped. He pulled Will closer, nosing against his neck to inhale the heady, sweet scent of him. “I suppose it isn’t.”

Chapter End Notes

And so they have arrived! I hope you enjoyed the indulgent boat sex and their new Deco abode. As you can probably tell, the "gift" chapter is up next. :D By the way, feel free to come say hi on Tumblr (It's me!) if you feel like it! And in related matters, I would be very obliged if you would share any chapters or excerpts to Tumblr if you're enjoying the fic. Or if any of you are on the visually artistic side and feel inspired to draw any scenes, I would probably faint from delight. *feels awkward now and scurries away*

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> The spleen eating hath arrived! This pairing, I tell ya...how did Hanni eating Will's spleen turn so fluffy and porny? I wanted to get this one absolutely perfect so I hope it delivers. :) As always, comments and kudos give me life so feel free to let me know your thoughts!
>
> Thank you to my buddy @castellomargot for being the absolute best beta I could ask for!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Since the boat had a significant amount of storage, Hannibal had packed the majority of the medical supplies from the basement of his cabin for their journey across the Atlantic. This left only a few purchases to be made for Will's surgery, most of which were devoted to procuring the ingredients for the resulting meal. Just a few days after arrival, they took the short boat ride to Abidjan. Will's heartrate fought to stay equalized as they approached the bustling city. It felt like years since he had been around that many people.

Once they docked and made their way into the center of the city, Will stuck close to Hannibal, eyes darting around without focus like a cat on alert. Hannibal by contrast seemed to feed off the energy of the streets. He appeared to grow taller, spine lengthening and straightening as his gait became something more akin to a swagger. It was to be expected; Hannibal had always thrived in social arenas as he was a man meant to roam free instead of languishing in captivity. Will laughed under his breath, a small sound swallowed by the din of the crowd, as he realized they resembled their old selves: Will trying his best to shrink into invisibility as Hannibal stood with bravado. Usually it was due to Will's general desire to avoid social interaction, but this time he was unsure how much of his reaction was about the possibility of them being recognized and apprehended. He took a deep breath and tried to remember that they were halfway across the world in a place people were very unlikely to be searching for them.

Will had insisted he not be present for the purchase of the food, preferring it to be a surprise and also recognizing that this would be a sacred rite for Hannibal. It only seemed right to give him privacy. There was the slightest flicker of concern in Hannibal's eyes at the suggestion, as though he still worried about the possibility of Will running away. Will alleviated the tension with a smile and a chaste kiss, ignoring the prying gazes of strangers for once. Satisfied, Hannibal smiled back and threaded his fingers through Will's hair before turning toward his destination.

As he walked away, Will felt a stab of anxiety at being separated from him for the first time since the cliff fall. He lingered nearby at an outdoor café so he could see the entrance to the

specialty foods shop where Hannibal was purchasing all the items he needed. He sipped the espresso that he had ordered in clumsy French from a remarkably patient barista, watching the shop door like a hawk and silently cursing himself for being so dependent on a beverage that only ever served to aggravate his anxiety. Most passersby didn't pay him any mind, but Will still let out a pent up exhalation of relief when Hannibal returned only twenty minutes later. Hannibal opened his mouth to suggest they explore more before returning home, but thought better of it when he saw Will's sweat sheened face and caffeinated pupils. There would be plenty of time to discover the city later.

Hannibal took much more care in prepping Will than he had with Bedelia. This time the operating table was an altar, and while Will was an offering, he was not a sacrifice.

"Are you cold?" Hannibal looked down at Will's clean skin, glaringly white under the operating lights, and saw a shiver flow down the length of his arms.

"A little."

Hannibal put two more sterile, white blankets on him, one draped over Will's legs and one on his upper chest. He paused, surveying his canvas and knowing that it would never look exactly like this again once he was through. Yet another scar would be added to the battle-worn vessel that was Will Graham, another memory of bloodshed to be treasured by them both, but this one would be unique. It would be the only mark they both chose to inflict rather than a sudden, ugly turn of events. No trauma this time. Only love. He traced a gloved finger along the dots marking the site of the impending incision and closed his eyes, picturing the interior: the blood pumping life into Will's breathtaking form like the surging current of a river, the subcutaneous fat cushioning the bones and organs, the last barrier as the skin is pierced.

Hannibal imagined presenting him as Persephone, beautiful harvest bounties of wheat, lilac, and pomegranate springing forth from the wound in his stomach and extending from his hands as though nature was birthed from his very fingertips. A flowing robe of flower petals swathing his lean limbs as he lay on a high, grassy hill somewhere, the rising sun making his pale skin appear diaphanous. A crown of roses, thorns still intact, woven together with jasmine atop his head.

Needless to say, Hannibal had pondered how he would present Will many times over the years. Nothing ever felt worthy or capable of matching Will's transcendence. He was accustomed to his inspirations coming to a head in a moment of revelation, an unmistakable click of the key as it met the lock and settled into place that always signified when the presentation was *ready* and final in his mind. This never happened with regard to Will Graham, and Hannibal now supposed that was as it should be. He had not been meant to make Will into a work of lifeless art, which was just one item in a litany of subverted expectations in the course of their relationship.

“Are you certain you truly want this? I would not be displeased were you to change your mind in this moment.” He met Will’s eyes and searched for any lingering doubts.

“I know what you were imagining just now.” Will looked at him with resolve. “Not down to the details, of course…but I know what you’re constructing in your mind. And I trust you not to do it.”

Will reached out a hand and cradled Hannibal’s wrist, careful to avoid his now washed and gloved hand.

“I want to give you this. I need it too, Hannibal.” His eyes watered ever so slightly. Hannibal found no hesitation in them. Only love.

He leaned in and kissed Will’s forehead lightly, savoring his musky, floral-tinged scent with a faint smile before pulling away. As he moved to get the oxygen mask, Will caught his wrist again.

“I know it’ll just make you have to wash your hands again, but…” Will looked at Hannibal timidly from under his lashes.

“What is it, dear Will?” Hannibal gazed down at Will with soft eyes, still mildly concerned about accepting Will’s yes.

“Can you…just hold my hand until I’m asleep?” Will muttered, not meeting his eyes.

“Will, if you are at all uncer – ”

“Hannibal, I’m *fine*. But it would be wildly inappropriate to not at least be a little bit nervous before going under the knife regardless of who is wielding said knife, wouldn’t you agree?” He forced himself to look at Hannibal to reassure him. And maybe to reassure himself just as well.

Hannibal nodded.

“Of course,” He whispered.

The doctor removed one of his gloves. With the hand that was still sheathed, he turned on the tank and placed the mask securely over Will’s mouth and nose, checking the tension of the band around the back of his head.

“Count backwards from a hundred for me, please.” He spoke in that familiar concerned therapist tone, mid-level volume and measured syllables designed to soothe and appease. Hannibal reached his other hand down to cradle Will’s own, grip firm and comforting but not too tight, careful to avoid inadvertently communicating any residual concern.

Will nodded, eyelids already fluttering drowsily. He was out before he reached ten.

Hannibal turned off the valve on the tank and took a moment to look at Will’s unconscious form. He placed his hand on Will’s stomach and kept the other one in Will’s now loosening grip. He closed his eyes and took a deep, slow breath. A breath for this quiet moment, a

breath for the beauty and significance of this gift, and above all, a breath for this great fulfillment of trust from his beloved.

Being overwhelmed was quite a rarity for Hannibal, but this offering becoming a reality made warm euphoria spread through his chest in an overpowering way that he could barely articulate. He silently bid it to subside for now, reminding himself that there would be time to reflect and honor this blessing later. Right now he needed to focus on the task at hand.

Leaning forward, he let go of Will's hand and kissed his forehead once more before washing his hands and getting to work.

When Will next woke, he was lying in their new bed clad in navy blue linen pajamas with white piping, clearly Hannibal's judging by both the lavish quality and size of them. They were a little too long on Will's arms and the fabric bunched a bit around his stomach. He groggily ran a tentative hand over the right side of his torso to raise the pajama top enough to see the bandaged portion of his left side. The wound was wrapped very thoroughly, tightly woven gauze cocooning his midsection. Moving his shirt back down, Will shifted on the mattress to try and sit up against the headboard but groaned as he felt his stomach clench in pain with the effort.

Hannibal was coming in through the door with a tray laden with pills and fluids right then, and he quickened his step when he saw Will's attempt. Placing the tray on the ornate wooden nightstand, he sat down next to Will and gently guided him back down with a hand on his shoulder.

"I apologize for not being here when you woke. I thought it would be another hour or so. Please do not attempt much maneuvering in bed yet. At the very least not without my help." Hannibal smoothed back the hair on Will's forehead and brought a glass of water to his lips, tilting it slowly as Will drank.

Will shook his head to signify it was enough after a few sips and leaned his head back with a sigh.

"Yes, Dr. Lecter," Will said, sarcasm on his sandpapery tongue as he closed his eyes.

"Even when you are in a physically weakened state and in need of my aid, you manage to adopt as much of a mocking tone as ever." Hannibal smiled reflectively and looked out the window. "I recall you insulting the quality of my soup even as you were paralyzed into helplessness from the drugs in your system before I began to cut into your head."

Will let out a weak chuckle and accepted the pills Hannibal placed on his tongue along with another mouthful of water to swallow them.

“What can I say? I’m feisty until the end. It’s the Will Graham guarantee.” He turned his head toward Hannibal and smiled sleepily. “I just woke up, but I feel like I could sleep for another twelve hours.”

“That tends to be the ensuing result when one has surgery, however minor it may be. I’ll leave you to rest and come back with something easily digestible in a couple hours. Tomorrow we’ll change your bandages.” Hannibal left the tray on the nightstand and got up to leave, but Will whined and caught his sleeve between thumb and forefinger. Hannibal glanced down and smiled at the childlike gesture. “Are you in need of anything else, dear Will?”

“Yes. My handsome, debonair…” Will fumbled for the right word. He was once again reminded of the fact that they didn’t really have a label. It wasn’t something that was essential to him; it didn’t taint their relationship. Will wasn’t a pining teenager after all. He knew what he and Hannibal were to each other wasn’t sufficiently defined by any conventional means so putting a name to it would hardly change things. Still, it was inconvenient at times like these when language failed him, and he wondered for the first time how Hannibal would introduce him to people when they finally rejoined society in a more permanent way under their assumed identities. Boyfriend? Partner? Husband? He tried to picture Hannibal gesturing in his direction at some pretentious event and presenting him to a high society acquaintance. “My ummm…you.” Will cringed at his ineptitude and then started to giggle. Suddenly this was all *very* funny.

Hannibal inclined his head in humorous curiosity and sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed.

“I’m here, Will.”

“Come to bed. I’m sure operating is tiring for the surgeon too.”

Hannibal hesitated as his eyes roved over Will’s abdomen.

“I do not wish to disturb your comfort while the wound is still very fresh.”

“Then lie on the other side. Set an alarm if you want, but just stay here with me for a while.” Will’s lips spread into a goofy grin. “Also, I’m pretty sure those pain pills are kicking in because I feel ggoooddd. *You* look good too. God…you always look *so good*.”

“Yes, I can see that the medication is exceeding its job description.” He smiled as he walked around the bed, took off his shoes, and carefully climbed in on the other side.

“Perks of having an unethical doctor for a boyfriend I guess. I didn’t even think about – ” Will’s jaw hung open as he realized in horror what he had just let slip. His brain was telling him to close his gaping mouth, but he seemed to have lost all control of the muscles in his face. “Did I say that out loud?”

“Assuming you are referring to the joke about having free reign over my arsenal of medications, then yes. You did,” Hannibal calmly stated as he adjusted the covers.

“Oh…” Will’s own voice sounded faraway to him, the painkiller haze making everything a little fuzzy and obscured. “What about the other part?”

Will felt, then heard the low rumble of a muted laugh. The sound made him feel fluid and warm.

“The colloquial term for a romantic partner part?”

“Yeah…that.” Will’s tongue felt like hot lead in his mouth. He tried to push it into the hollow of his cheek, but it wouldn’t bend to his will. It seemed to have a mind of its own.

“Yes, you spoke that aloud as well.” He turned on his side to face Will and ran a hand down his upper arm. Will was relieved to see Hannibal didn’t look exasperated or uncomfortable in any way. If anything, he looked rather charmed with Will’s drug-addled antics, his eyes laughing even though his mouth wasn’t.

“Any…uh…comments on that? Questions?” Will’s heart felt like it was beating in his throat so thickly he was going to choke on it, and his face was starting to sweat. He wasn’t sure how much of it was due to the meds and the repercussions of surgery and how much was directly caused by anxiety about his loose, uncontrollable tongue.

The resultant pause felt like an eternity.

“I’m not certain now is the best time – ”

“Just reassure me right now because I’m feeling very, very stupid, and no amount of Vicodin and codeine cocktail or whatever the fuck you gave me is pushing away the extremely insistent ‘you’re an idiot’ voice.” Will threw his head back on the pillow. Well… more of a weak flop than a throw now that his limbs felt like jello.

“I am happy with whatever you wish to call me, Will. As I am sure you know, I do consider any known term to be sufficient means of properly labeling what lies between us, but I also do not object to its usage either. I understand that the day will come when we are living in society in a more complete way than we have been, and conventional labels become not only useful but necessary in such times.” Hannibal continued to stroke Will’s arm and leaned in to tenderly kiss the side of his face.

“Mmm maybe we could adopt the “*murder husbands*” moniker. Reclaim it. Imagine that printed on your business cards. Goddamn Freddie the Flea was right, wasn’t she? The second I feel less wacked out on drugs, I’m looking at her joke of a journalism efforts. I bet she’s printing t shirts right this second. Coffee mugs. Selling rights to a goddamn Lifetime movie. Something with a horrendously sleazy title like ‘Tempted By Sin’ or ‘Lost in the Hot Darkness of Hannibal Lecter’s Mind.’” Will tried to raise a fist to shake it indignantly, but his limbs felt heavy and tingly. He only made it a few inches off the comforter before dropping it with a defeated thump. He laughed and affected a cheesy narrator’s voice before continuing, “‘This FBI agent got more than he bargained for when they assigned him an intriguing, sexy psychiatrist with a mysterious past and hidden agenda no one could have guessed. In a detective’s race against the clock, can he show everyone who Dr. Lecter really is or is it too late for him? Is Will falling under his manipulative spell without even realizing it? *Who* is

profiling *whom*?' Holy shit, I take back the snarky tone. I would watch the *fuck* out of this movie. Call Freddie. We gotta get in on this. I want full script and casting approval."

Hannibal suppressed a laugh and drew the covers up around Will's neck, smoothing down the edge of the side furthest from him.

"Save your strength for more vital endeavors and try to get some rest right now. Tattle Crime won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

"Did you just tuck me in?" Will asked dreamily, eyelids growing heavier by the second. "You win the sweetest cannibal boyfriend trophy…you know what the trophy is made of? Huh? A human foot!"

Will laughed like he had made the world's very best joke. The last thing he remembered before falling asleep was Hannibal's beleaguered but undeniably fond sigh.

When Will finally returned to consciousness, Hannibal was no longer at his side, and the room was dark. He stretched and groaned at the ache it caused in his abdomen. He pulled the chain on the bedside lamp and squinted at the silver twin bell alarm clock. It read 7:42. After only a minute or two of lying there deciding what to do, Hannibal appeared in the doorframe carrying a steaming bowl of something.

"How do you do that? Are you a witch? Some siren goes off in your brain when the Graham stirs?" Will raised an eyebrow in mock suspicion. The drugs had worn off mostly, but there was still a speck of playfulness lingering.

"Nothing quite that supernatural. It was time for you to take another pill. And one might argue it is you who are uncannily aware of my presence as you seem to wake just as I arrive." Hannibal smiled and sat the bowl down on the tray perched on the nightstand (Will could now see it was some sort of soup that was mostly broth), and sat next to Will. He placed the back of his hand on Will's forehead to check for any signs of fever, paused in thought for a second, and then pulled a thermometer case out of his pocket. "You do not feel feverish to the touch, but I would still like to take your temperature just in case. Warding against infection is the most important thing at this stage, and elevated temperature would be the first sign of that."

Hannibal snapped the case open, and Will opened his mouth, lifting his tongue obediently as the older man slid the thermometer inside. They both waited in silence until it sounded a series of low beeps. Hannibal removed it and nodded when he saw the reading was normal. He reached for the bowl and blew on a spoonful of the liquid before bringing it to Will's lips. Will sat up a little so that he wasn't completely supine, petulantly waving off the hand Hannibal extended to him for help. He swallowed the warm liquid. It was smooth yet tasted like chicken noodle.

“What is it?” Will asked after a couple more spoonfuls.

“I’m afraid it’s too early in the healing process for you to digest my ‘pretentious albeit tasty version of chicken soup’,” Hannibal teased, “So for now this is simply a chicken stock with very small bits of meat shredded finely enough to go down with ease.”

“You don’t have to feed me. My arms still work as far as I know. I just might need help getting into a completely upright position first.”

“I want to,” Hannibal admitted, “if you would permit me.”

“You always did like taking care of the aftermath,” Will softly stated, glancing at Hannibal.

Hannibal paused, spoon halfway to Will’s mouth.

“Yes…I very much enjoyed administering comfort to counteract the pain in regard to you,” Hannibal quietly affirmed, bringing the spoon to Will’s lips.

“Pain you inflicted,” Will declared matter-of-factly.

“Only seemed appropriate. Your pleasure felt like it belonged to me every bit as much as your agony.” Hannibal watched Will thoughtfully and tilted his head in consideration before adding, “Your recovery and strength of character in the rebuilding process has always held a fascination for me that rivals that of the lure of witnessing how beautifully you break.”

“You’re right. You really aren’t the right one to ask about how misguided that line of thinking is or isn’t, Mr. Possessive.” Will smiled to let Hannibal know he wasn’t trying to scold him.

The look on Hannibal’s face suggested he was not totally convinced of that.

“This brings up complicated feelings for you, doesn’t it? Tending to me in a situation like this with such a different impetus than before.” Will spoke slowly, choosing his words with care, the realization of their truth happening in real time as he uttered them.

Hannibal nodded contemplatively.

“It is almost as if this is an alternate timeline, a glitch in the continuous lines connecting our past and present, running through the strings like electricity only to flicker and spark with a change of course, flashing a glimmer of perhaps what could have been.”

“Do you find that your…*inclinations* lie more toward the healing category and less to the destructive side these days?” Will looked at the older man reservedly, partly not wanting to broach any heavy topics while in a weakened state but also unable to deny his curiosity.

Bringing another spoonful to Will’s mouth, Hannibal swallowed and cleared his throat, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

“Part of me wishes to express discontent at your predisposition to ask such a thing,” Hannibal made an amused noise, his lips quirking up slightly at the corners, “while the other part of me

knows with absolute certainty that is well within your rights to wonder this, even after everything we have shared recently."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help but ask." Will swallowed another bit of broth and averted his eyes.

"The answer is yes, they do. Pain inflicted on you would feel like cutting into myself were it to happen now, be it at my hands or at the hands of anyone else. And there is no need for apologies. It will not all be resolved in one conversation, and that is quite alright, Will. Truthfully, I am still surprised that everything has progressed as quickly and smoothly as it has thus far." Though Hannibal's words were patient and understanding, the line of his lips marginally tightened. Will wondered if part of Hannibal was waiting for the other shoe to drop. That was something Will could definitely sympathize with.

"Not exactly modus operandi for us, is it?" Will put a conciliatory hand on Hannibal's wrist.

"Indeed it is not." Hannibal smiled and put the now empty bowl on the tray. His expression turned serious. "You mentioned that you were aware I was mentally sketching a pictorial of your demise while you were laid out on the operating table for me."

"Yes," Will acknowledged.

"Yet you remained stalwart in your decision, not a vestige of trepidation to be found in your eyes." Hannibal's dark eyes narrowed ever so slightly, always sharp and evaluating.

"I knew you wouldn't hurt me. You don't want to live a life without me anymore than I want one without you, and I think both of us have proven that beyond a shadow of a doubt. I imagine visualizing the display is automatic for you. It's nothing personal. Just a reflex." Will laughed. "That sounds demented to say, doesn't it? It's true though, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. In one way, it is an empty thought that flashes by in an instant before dissolving forever. But in another…" Hannibal crossed his legs, joined his hands around his knee, and gazed out the window behind the nightstand.

"What?" Will covered Hannibal's hands with his own.

"The thought of your death now is a devastating possibility, a black vacuity that would extinguish all embers sustaining my own life. Empty and purposeless like a pebble falling down a bottomless well for all eternity. In this way, I find some comfort in reflecting upon how to display you should such an unwelcome event come to pass. I detest thinking of you decomposing in a common box in the ground or being cremated in the assembly line facilities of today, handled by unworthy hands and funneled into a receptacle like an object for sale, adorning a mantle like a trinket." Hannibal turned back to Will with determined eyes, lips twitching almost imperceptibly. "You deserve a funeral that would be a true tribute. A ceremony as unique and beautiful as you are."

Will squeezed Hannibal's hand.

"You can display me however you want, Hannibal. I would be *honored* to have you make me into a work of art instead of putting me in the ground next to strangers in a cemetery. I always

hated that idea anyway. I don't see the point of spending money on an expensive box just for me to rot inside it. I'd rather…" Will's brows knit together in concentration. "I don't know exactly what I'd want, but I know I don't like the idea of being enclosed or…entombed in any way."

"Would you find it too morbid of me to ask that you share your final wishes whenever the inspiration comes to you?" Hannibal twined his fingers with Will's and looked down at him with questioning eyes.

"Not at all. Discussing what will happen to your body after death is a pretty standard long term relationship conversation, but of course in our case, that conversation takes a decidedly perverse turn." Will smiled lovingly. "Can I ask that you do the same?"

Hannibal practically beamed at Will.

"Certainly. I would entrust the responsibility to *no one* else." Hannibal tightened his fingers around Will's before straightening his posture and raising his eyebrows as if he had just remembered something. "I almost forgot."

He retrieved a pill from the tray and handed it to Will along with a glass of water.

Will regarded the pale, round medicine with a sigh.

"About these…"

"Yes, I have rethought the dosage after today's earlier amusement. This should have less of an intoxicating effect." Hannibal's smile turned rather smug, and Will rolled his eyes.

"I'm sorry I asked you to be my boyfriend under the influence of heavy narcotic painkillers. Did I ask you to be my date to the sock hop too? Offer you my letter jacket and class ring?" Will winced at the hazy memory and swallowed the white pill.

"Sadly, no. I'm rather offended. I was anxiously awaiting your invitation," Hannibal said in mock sincerity, eyes twinkling mischievously. "I do believe there was mention of a Lifetime movie produced by the obstinate Ms. Lounds though."

Will groaned and pulled the covers over his head.

"God, you would think it would take elephant tranquilizers to have an effect on me after all the times I've been shot and stabbed. I'm guessing your drugs are more potent than most. Anyway, you shouldn't make fun of me when I'm sick. I'm an easy target."

"Isn't that what boyfriends do?" Hannibal pulled the covers back down and kissed Will's frowning lips.

Hannibal spent a couple weeks fussing over Will as though he were a glass figurine balanced precariously on a shelf edge, and Will was honestly beginning to feel smothered and impatient.

“How is it that the man who once thought sawing into my skull constituted an act of forgiveness is now treating me like I’m an invalid? You didn’t handle me with kid gloves this delicate even after we fell off a goddamn cliff.” Will waved away Hannibal’s extended arm and got up from the red velvet chair.

“‘Fell’ is an interesting choice of words for what occurred on that bluff.” Hannibal raised a jocular eyebrow.

“Yeah yeah I pushed us. A fact which has been reiterated ad nauseum, and I’m guessing probably will continue to be until death do us part.” Will rolled his eyes and walked through the kitchen and into the adjoining sunroom.

Hannibal trailed behind, plucking a peach from the fruitbowl on the kitchen table and making a depression in the flesh with his thumb to test the ripeness as he strode past.

“No more, I suspect, than I will be continually reviled for the attempted cranial intrusion in Italy.” Hannibal winked and bit into the peach.

“Did you just *wink*?” Will laughed as he laid down on the chaise in front of the windows. The midafternoon sun was refreshing, and Will noticed Hannibal admiring the way it framed his reclining figure.

Hannibal smiled to himself as he sat down in the cushy white armchair at Will’s feet. He took another bite of the juicy fruit and leaned his head back. He looked engrossed in the deep pockets of his memory.

“I winked at dear Frederick once.”

“I’m going to need some context for that.” Will tapped his socked foot against Hannibal’s knee.

“When you were in prison and Jack had begun to finally take your suspicions seriously or, at the very least, seriously enough to entertain investigating me in a manner I assume he thought was clever. They both attended a dinner party of mine, and Frederick was unable to tame his grimace into submission, transparent as ever. I could not resist making him flinch like a small woodland creature hiding in the brush who cannot see far enough onto the horizon to know just how much farther his enemy sees.” Hannibal’s lips quirked up in self-satisfaction at the memory.

“I wish I’d been there to see that. Very like you to taunt him even when you knew he *knew*.” Will shifted so that his feet rested in Hannibal’s lap.

“Chilton's truculence was all pomp and circumstance. False posturing to conceal his impotence. He was never equipped to dismantle my layers of protection. Even if he had been afforded a lifetime in which to accomplish the task, he would have failed miserably.”

Hannibal took a particularly spiteful bite of the peach and then gazed fondly at Will. “I suspect everyone I encountered would have continued to fail fantastically were it not for you, my cunning boy…I was so very proud of you for disfiguring him.”

“Would you be disappointed if I said I regretted it sometimes?”

“Disappointed? No. But I must assure you that there never was a creature less deserving of your regret. He is a sniveling coward, the very definition of reaping what one sows. There is not a single ‘accomplishment’ of his that was garnered by means of merit. He has always made his living off the backs of others though I must admit Chilton did have an entertaining role as *le bouffon* in the stage play of our lives.” Hannibal finished the peach and set the remains on a plate atop the small glass table next to his chair. Will shook his head as he noticed that Hannibal had consumed the entire peach without spilling even the tiniest dribble of juice down his chin. *Immaculate bastard.* This led Will to think about other things dribbling down Hannibal’s chin, and he clamped his lips together to suppress a groan. Hannibal took one of Will’s feet in hand and rubbed a firm thumb into the arch.

“Is that why you never killed him? Too much fun to bat around like a cat with a toy mouse?” Will sighed happily from the massage and closed his eyes.

Hannibal looked thoughtfully into the yard, watching the palms wave in the gentle breeze. An olive ibis landed on a thick branch of the large shea tree and shook its wings to cast off moisture from the ocean.

“Yes and no…Frederick always excelled at bringing about his own ever increasingly detrimental life consequences without any outside help. I did derive a great deal of satisfaction from watching the balance of the universe make itself known, opening up to devour and spit him out, worse for the wear every single time yet somehow still hanging on by a dwindling thread.” Hannibal’s hand stilled on Will’s foot as he cocked his head in consideration. “Frederick was always in reserve for me should he prove useful. And he very much did, as you know.”

Hannibal smiled and stroked Will’s calf, hand stopping to rest around his ankle.

Will’s mouth emitted that characteristically clipped laugh of his.

“He certainly did. Can you imagine what would have happened if we had both been in there at the same time? We could have volleyed his brain back and forth until he was so drowned in uncertainty, he couldn’t spell his own name.”

Hannibal’s face lit up with pride.

“What a delightfully devious boy you are.”

Will scooted down the chaise a few inches and deliberately ran his foot along Hannibal’s groin.

“I miss feeling you inside me,” he purred, stretching his body out in invitation, arms folded behind his head.

“As do I. I believe we can remedy that soon.” Hunger flashed in Hannibal’s dark eyes only to be replaced by composure almost too quickly to register. “Not yet though.”

Will made a grunt of aggravation, and Hannibal smirked, sure fingers resuming a slow massage of his feet.

“Always such a reckless boy. Give your body a few more days of rest.”

“And then?”

“Then we dine on a sumptuous feast.” The hunger returned to his eyes, and Will tried his best not to look complacent.

The table was set in deep reds and crisp whites, a reminder of blood on bone, vibrant life juxtaposed with the pallor of death. The floral centerpiece was three large white clusters from an Ivory Coast lily with red hibiscus and orange and red Cattleya orchids interwoven in the gaps. There was a taper in a single silver holder on each end, clearly cut to specific height. A silk brocade table runner was situated perfectly in the middle, spanning the length of the table and hanging off either side, the deep maroon patterns on it swirling with intricate shapes. It looked like floral vines wrapping around fleur-de-lis, but the form wasn’t quite as easily definable as that. Will ran a careful thumb along the smooth silk and waited, pulse thrumming in anticipation, the cadence of his breath skipping and stuttering.

In front of him was an immaculate white china place setting, an empty wine glass and water goblet on either side of Will’s plate. Hannibal’s place setting was at the head of the table with Will seated to his left. A glass decanter in which Hannibal had emptied a bottle of cabernet franc an hour earlier was behind the centerpiece. It brought back memories of past meals at Hannibal’s table. It had been so long since they dined like this, everything fastidiously arranged for maximum aesthetic value. Hearing Hannibal dashing about all day in meticulous preparation reminded Will that Hannibal really did enjoy having friends for dinner for reasons beyond the sinister. He hadn’t been entirely putting on airs when he entertained guests back in Baltimore. The experience was an opportunity to flaunt and provide, posturing elegantly like a peacock in the wild. There was a ritual to it Hannibal wouldn’t have put forth the effort to complete so frequently if he didn’t derive pleasure from it beyond the chance to make cannibal puns and feed the ignorant the most taboo delicacy around.

Hannibal walked into the dining room, Will hearing his swift stride and the exact click of his shoes on the oak floor before he saw him approaching in his periphery. He set a small plate inside the larger serving plate, and put an identical one in his place setting.

“Before our main course,” Hannibal explained as he reached for the decanter to pour each of them a glass full, “blood sausage with saffron butter beans and a mushroom risotto with a drizzle of truffle oil.”

He pulled out his chair, sat down, and unfolded the dark red cloth napkin next to his plate before laying it across his lap. When he lifted his eyes to meet Will's, the corners of Will's mouth tugged up into a smile at the rare nervousness he saw reflected in those amber irises.

"You look less confident than you usually are in your culinary presentation."

"Well, it has been quite some time. I will admit minor reservations about my capabilities having atrophied." Hannibal smiled expectantly back at him. "And of course, this meal bears much more importance than any past feast."

Will took the hint and appreciatively inhaled the aromas before taking a bite, careful to layer each ingredient equally on his fork. He was moaning before he even swallowed.

"Your talents haven't withered in the slightest, Hannibal. It's incredible," Will praised sincerely, reaching for the wine to experience the pairing of the two before taking another bite, "I don't think my palate was able to decipher much of anything beyond a generic 'this is good' and 'this is bad' categorization before you, but now…I know I don't approach your level, but I can definitely appreciate the complementary flavors in your cooking."

"Thank you, Will. I am immensely pleased to finally be able to cook for you at this echelon again. I have greatly missed our dinners." Hannibal took a bite from his plate and closed his eyes, chewing slowly to savor it.

"I tried to cook…" Will hesitated, fork halfway to his mouth, "after you…when I lived with Molly and Walter."

Hannibal's eyes crinkled slightly in pleasure at the way Will had phrased that. *Lived with*. Like he was speaking about a roommate he had been assigned. Not a lover he had chosen.

"I am glad to hear it. I believe it to be an essential skill, providing for oneself in the most basic of senses."

Will watched Hannibal eating, always so refined, never slovenly as he delicately cut into the meat and speared a piece with his fork, tines down, before bringing it to his beautifully curved mouth.

"Yeah, well…I was complete shit at it so I wouldn't say I learned to provide really," Will snorted, taking another bite of sausage and risotto.

"I did become a master of blueberry pancakes though…I thought of you every time I cooked." He blushed as he looked up at Hannibal, feeling a little bashful about talking about pancakes in front of such an extraordinary chef.

"Will you make them for me sometime?" Hannibal beamed proudly at him before taking a sip of wine, the stem of the glass carefully pinched between two fingers.

Will laughed in disbelief.

"If you insist."

“I very much do.” Hannibal covered Will’s hand with his own. “Now, it appears we are both ready for the main event.”

Will inhaled sharply.

“Yeah, I guess we are.”

Hannibal stood from his chair and grabbed both now empty plates before carrying them off to the kitchen.

A couple minutes later he returned with two more and nestled them inside the larger plates on the table. As he sat down, he took a deep breath and clasped his hands in front of his face, looking as though he were about to pray. He was looking down at the plate instead of Will, a deferential expression on his handsome face. Will knew that all of this night was essentially just that. Worship.

“Braised, rolled spleen, layered with bacon and fresh sage leaves, pan seared before finished in the oven in a bit of broth. Parsley salad, sliced red onion, radishes, and cornichons to accompany it. Simple yet elegant. Fresh, light ingredients paired with the richer, heavier main components.” Hannibal’s gaze rose to meet Will’s, and Will suddenly realized that he was waiting for approval.

“It looks amazing, Hannibal. Plated to perfection.” Will smiled admiringly. “I think you should have the first bite.”

Hannibal swallowed and nodded silently before picking up his utensils and carving off a piece of the spleen. He picked up a bit of parsley salad and onion with his knife and layered it on top of the meat. He regarded the forkful for a couple seconds, seemingly baffled that it was really there in front of him, before finally bringing it to his eagerly parted lips.

Hannibal closed his eyes as he chewed, head tilting back slightly, breath slow enough that he appeared to be absorbed in a meditative state. As he swallowed, he seemed to press his eyes shut tighter, and Will was confused for a minute at the expression of pain he thought he was reading in the lines of Hannibal’s face. But then he opened his eyes, and when Will looked into them he could see they were wet and red-rimmed.

“Hannibal…” Will whispered as he cradled his cheek, thumb dropping down to brush his moist pink lips.

“Darling Will…” It was nearly inaudible in the quiet dining room. Hannibal looked incapable of speech. His mouth opened and closed as if he was deciding on the right words, rolling the syllables around on his tongue with uncertainty before pushing them out into the world. They remained like that in silence for a moment, Will’s fingers gently caressing the side of Hannibal’s face, waiting for him to be ready to speak again. “You are…pure divinity. Like swallowing the most sacred of talismans and absorbing their very power through consumption. Like reaching into the stratosphere and entrapping a fistful of stardust. This moment feels holier than witnessing any mythical occurrence passed down through history. I cannot accurately express my gratitude. Will…”

Hannibal said his name like it was interchangeable with god's, and Will supposed that for him it was.

"I'm happy I could give you this, mylimasis." Will smiled and dropped his hand, returning to his own plate. He sliced off a piece of himself and brought it to his mouth as he looked into Hannibal's expectant eyes. When Will began to chew, Hannibal let out a rushed breath as though he had been holding it in. It reminded Will of liver in both taste and texture, and the sage and bacon married a salty, savory flavor to it that made for a perfect complement. He took a bite of radish and parsley salad and admired the way it offset the richness.

Consuming himself left Will with a peculiar feeling he couldn't quite pinpoint. It was epic and strange and yet natural and detached all at the same time. He was accustomed to joining Hannibal at the table so he didn't balk at the concept anymore even if he was the dish on the menu this time. There was an ease of separation when it came to thinking about himself as the food on the table. What seemed most important was the way Hannibal was looking at him. The way they would carry this memory to both of their graves someday, a heightened expression of their union neither thought possible until now.

"My remarkable boy." Hannibal smiled, eyes awash with love.

They both returned to their offal dishes, neither daring to speak for a while as they swallowed this sacrifice that was so weighted with significance and sanctity there were hardly enough words in any tongue to illustrate it with precision.

"People…" Will eventually spoke, grasping for the right words. "They will focus on the horrors of me joining you in your disturbing urges. How could I have fallen so far from the righteous path as someone who was sworn to uphold it? Seduced by darkness…it's a nice tabloid narrative. It will serve Freddie well. But I wonder if anyone…Jack, Alana…I wonder if they know how often I willingly joined you at the table long before they suspected any change in me."

Hannibal inclined his head and made an amused huff.

"I have thought of that often, actually. You allowed your palate to be broadened even when you did not have a convenient excuse to hide behind…you were always the man I saw that you were. The fishing line only needed to be wound back on the reel to pull you out of yourself." Hannibal met his eyes as he raised his glass, and Will toasted him.

Will finished his meal and watched intently as Hannibal arranged the final bite of his. He watched Hannibal's warm tongue cradling the meat, the food resting in the depression in the middle of it before he sealed his lips. Will felt his cock stirring in his pants as he imagined that tongue wrapped around the meat, moistening it with saliva as it eased down Hannibal's throat and into his belly, a very real part of Will's body nourishing him. Life going into life. An involuntary moan escaped his lips as he stared at the muscles in Hannibal's jaw.

Hannibal swallowed and abruptly turned his head in Will's direction. His eyes were animalistic and wild. It was only a second before they were on each other, chairs pushed back so hard they nearly toppled over. Will almost tore the fabric of Hannibal's suit jacket in his hurry to get it off. Hannibal gripped Will's ass with desperate hands and hoisted him up, Will

automatically linking his legs around Hannibal's waist. He laid him down on the other end of the table, Will chuckling at how he was carefully avoiding any disturbance to his exquisite table setting.

Hannibal stood between Will's spread legs and pushed him on his back, wet mouth descending on his lips, ears, and neck. Will lifted up to shed his own jacket and then started on the buttons of Hannibal's waistcoat.

"You look gorgeous, but why do you have to be wearing so many fucking layers right now?" Will's voice was gruff and impatient. He switched to undressing himself, lifting his dress shirt over his head instead of bothering with the buttons.

Hannibal actually groaned, chest heaving with desire as he struggled with the rest of his clothes.

Will wriggled out of his pants and underwear and sat up, resting his hands on Hannibal's button down, his fingers gripping the collar like a question.

Hannibal nodded jerkily, eyes needy, and that was all Will needed. He ripped it open, buttons clattering to the floor as Hannibal shoved his pants down around his thighs and pushed Will back onto the table, the table legs scraping harshly across the wooden floor.

Greedy hands clamping around Will's thighs, Hannibal yanked him to the edge of the table as his mouth kept devouring every patch of skin, bites turning from tender to sharp. Will yelped at the feverish pleasure laced with the perfect amount of pain. Hannibal was *finally* overcome enough to stop worrying about Will's comfort, and Will silently yearned for it to stay that way. He was sucking on Will's flesh like he wanted to inhale it, siphon it right from the bone. Will recoiled as his mouth grazed the newly healed wound, but Hannibal only ran his tongue along it in one thick, wet stripe, moaning with his eyes closed in bliss. He lapped at it as if enthralled, face flushed as he kissed and licked, pouring all his adoration onto the canvas of Will's body.

When he rose to look at Will again, the beast was clearly uncaged. Will spread his legs wide and nodded, panting in anticipation. Hannibal pulled the lube from his pants pocket and paused a moment. Will could see his face change as he called upon his control to return. As he opened the tube to squeeze some onto his fingers, Will clamped a hand down on his wrist.

"*No. Don't make me wait.*" Decisive and unmistakable. Will wanted to say more, but his thoughts were racing and his mouth wouldn't cooperate. *Don't prepare me don't stop to think don't hold back this time don't you fucking dare.*

Hannibal's eyes darted back to Will's, and he saw that he understood. Like oil coating glass, the beast returned, Hannibal's features twisting into an insatiable, dangerous look of pure *need.*

Yes yes yes please. Please. Will begged with his eyes, and Hannibal answered with his hands, slicking his throbbing erection hurriedly and pushing Will's knees to his chest before sliding inside in one unforgiving thrust.

Will brought his hand to his mouth and bit down, shouting and grunting from the shock of it. Hannibal wrenched Will's hand away from his mouth.

"Never suppress. I want to hear every glorious sound you make." Hannibal's low, brusque tone went straight to Will's aching cock.

Please don't stop I'm fine I'm fine know that I'm fine. Will didn't know if he'd said it out loud, but Hannibal heard him anyway, thrusting in a punishing rhythm before Will could catch his breath. His moans were coming out in broken, cutoff bits of sounds, and he groped for something to hold onto as Hannibal fucked him relentlessly across the table.

Hannibal's eyes were fiercely predatory as he watched Will writhe on the table. Will wasn't sure if he was twisting in pain or desire, the dividing line seemed to vanish and he wanted it all. Suddenly, Hannibal pulled out. Will flinched at the sharp pang of discomfort, but Hannibal didn't give him time to recover.

"Turn around and bend over the table." Even though he was panting and disheveled, Hannibal sounded serenely calm. But his lustful eyes looked ready to devour, and he gave Will's right thigh a quick slap when he didn't obey quickly enough. Will smirked when he was sure Hannibal couldn't see his face anymore and stretched his arms out to grip the edge of the table. Hannibal wrapped an arm around Will's waist and roughly pulled him closer, his hard cock nudging between Will's cheeks, now slick with lube and sweat. He leaned over until his chest covered Will's back.

"Do you think I did not see that arrogant smirk? You believe you have provoked me into losing control, don't you?" Hannibal mouthed at his ear, and Will's cock twitched at the sound of his smoky voice.

"N-no." Will's voice quaked with uncertainty. He wasn't sure what the right answer was.

"Do not lie to me, Will." Hannibal's tone was firm but still controlled. His hand came down hard on Will's ass twice.

"Fuck," Will gasped, chest falling against the table. "I'm sorry." His cock was trapped between his stomach and the table, and he moaned at the aching friction as he collapsed on the smooth wooden surface.

"That was not a proper apology, Will. You know better than that." His hand slapped Will's reddened ass twice more, palm lingering afterward to warm the tender flesh in slow circles.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Lecter. *Please*." Will was whining and grinding against the table now, so desperate for Hannibal to fill him again.

"Do you want me to fuck you, Will? Hard and without regard for your comfort? Fill you until you feel as though you might rip apart from the inside? Use you for my pleasure until you are begging me to touch you?" Hannibal was nearly growling, teeth scraping at Will's ears and neck, a warning that made Will shiver and moan.

"*Yes. Please. I need it."* Will groaned and pushed his ass back against Hannibal's cock.

“Anything you want, my darling boy,” Hannibal’s voice became tender for a minute before the darkness took hold once again, “but do know this. This is not me losing control. You have not even *begun* to see that.”

Hannibal stood up and pulled Will’s thighs further apart before entering him again. It was rough and urgent, and Will didn’t try to muffle his cries this time. Hannibal kept fucking into him at a brutal pace, Will’s knuckles whitening as he gripped the edge of the dining table. He felt the heat rumbling low in his belly and silently begged for Hannibal to keep going until it unfurled. He clenched his muscles around Hannibal’s cock, smiling dazedly when it drew a ragged moan from him. Will’s cock stiffened and he nearly screamed as he came, his erection still trapped against him, his come spreading in warm spurts against his skin. He released his vise grip on the table’s edge and pounded a numb fist against it.

Will felt boneless and fluid as Hannibal kept fucking him, never letting up for a second, the brutal stretch of it all-consuming and everything he wanted. The now healed scar from his surgery was beginning to throb yet he still craved Hannibal taking his fill, regretting suddenly that he couldn’t see the older man’s face as he came undone. Hannibal’s grip on Will’s thighs tightened until it made him whimper, his fingers bruising the supple skin. He thrust deep inside one last time, burying himself in Will’s tight heat as he came with a groan that sounded almost anguished.

Will closed his eyes, sweat running down his face and onto the cool table. He felt at peace, beatific and sated. His head was emptied of everything in a way he didn’t know possible. They lay together in blissful exhaustion, and for a while Will didn’t hear anything except the sound of their collective breathing. He knew he should get up, but his limbs couldn’t seem to muster the willpower.

Eventually Hannibal kissed Will’s sweaty shoulder and withdrew, snaking an arm around Will’s waist as he pulled him to a standing position. Will made a small noise of protest, his heavy head lolling back against Hannibal’s shoulder. Bracing an arm behind his knees, Hannibal picked him up, supporting the back of his neck against his other arm.

“You’re making this a habit. Careful. I might get used to it. End up expecting to be carted around everywhere like royalty.” Will smiled and kissed his neck.

“Perhaps that has been my plan all along. You know I do not object to taking care of you.” Hannibal smiled back and carried Will to the second floor bathroom.

The bathroom had a black and white chevron floor that Will wasn’t exactly fond of; it felt a little too much like stepping into *Twin Peaks*. The enormous clawfoot tub in the middle was definitely a bonus though. It seemed so luxurious, and Will raised his eyebrows at Hannibal when he realized what he intended.

“Are you going to wash me?”

“Aftercare, remember?” Hannibal whispered, gazing down at Will with soft eyes. All the domineering presence of earlier was completely gone, replaced by warm affection.

“How could I forget?” Will nuzzled against his cheek and hoped Hannibal could hear his thoughts. *Thank you*.

Chapter End Notes

So due to busy life stuff, I'm not sure when the next update will come. Just know that I AM always writing this fic in some form or another. I just don't have as much free time to hammer it out as I'd like!

Whenever the next chapter does arrive, we will we back in the present with murder husbands getting on with the business of dealing with that rude neighbor Hamish. :)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I have returned! My sincerest apologies for the gap between updates. That's what I get for publishing a WIP haha. Just how it goes sometimes. :) Hopefully you will find that this chapter was worth the wait!

Quick logistical note so no one is confused: we are back in present day now. This chapter takes place the morning after Will told Hannibal he had a plan for Hamish. You may also remember (or may not because I sure as hell needed a refresher course lol) that Hannibal had told Will he wasn't going to touch him (sexually anyway) for an unspecified amount of time to explore their mutual curiosity in submission/dominance. Please let me know if I should have added some more specific tags to the work for anything that happens in this section!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun woke Will the next morning, the humid air rising in the room until he could no longer ignore it in favor of burying his face in the pillow. He rolled his neck and stretched his arms above his head, rousing sleepy limbs into action for the day. It was the first time in almost a week that he had felt refreshed upon waking.

But as he rose from bed and pulled a t-shirt over his head, images of the night before played through his mind in a sped up film strip. Viewing them with a clear head made his temples throb and a nauseous wave of regret seep through him. It was like an emotional hangover. *A rage hangover* he decided.

He made his way downstairs and into the kitchen, where he found Hannibal situated at the breakfast nook with a mug of coffee and his tablet, reading with a furrowed brow. There were fresh flowers in a vase on the table. Will slid in next to him in the corner of the cushioned booth. As he leaned in to kiss his cheek, Hannibal caught him by surprise and turned his head to catch the younger man’s lips instead. Will still wasn’t sure where the line had been drawn in the sand regarding Hannibal’s celibacy directive.

“Mmm morning.” Will smiled and glanced down at the tablet. “What are you reading?”

“I thought it was time we check on the circulating news regarding our whereabouts.”

“And?” Will snatched the mug and took a few swallows, earning him a playful scowl from Hannibal.

“Would you like your own?”

“Yes, please.” Will surrendered the cup and waited patiently as Hannibal got up and walked to the island to fill another large, empty black mug. Will swiped a finger across the tablet’s screen and watched the artificial light illuminate the article. *Murder Husband Search on Indefinite Hiatus?* He leaned back with a heavy sigh as the all-too-familiar masthead came into focus. “You never killed Freddie because she fed into your narcissistic desires too much with this drivel.”

It wasn’t posed as a question.

“I rather admire her tenacity. However, she *is* tactless and has a blatant disrespect for boundaries.” *Pot meet kettle*. Hannibal set a steaming cup of coffee in front of Will and sat down next to him. “It is unfortunate for the families of victims and the accused alike that she makes slanderous claims with little concern for their grief. But you cannot deny that she has carved a unique niche all her own in a cutthroat business that is not for the faint of heart… however distasteful that niche may be.”

“That wasn’t exactly a denial, doctor.” Will curled his fingers around the handle of the mug and brought it to his lips, tablet still in the other hand. “There isn’t anything admirable or courageous about what Freddie does…making money off the backs of the personal tragedies of strangers. Her heart isn’t anything but deceitful.”

“How does it feel to see your name on the front page of such sensationalistic speculation?” Hannibal’s eyes swept over Will’s face as he read.

“Freddie has written about me before.” The younger man’s finger scrolled further down the digital page.

“Yes, but this is different. You have been granted the ability to see how the world views you posthumously. It is a rare occurrence. Your memory will turn to myth and legend, aggrandized tales unfolding while you have no say in the matter.” Hannibal stared off into the distance as he briefly receded into his own mind, a hand absently stroking the back of Will’s neck.

Will leaned into the touch before shrinking away again as he remembered that fulfillment had been replaced with temporary deprivation. Shifting in the booth, he crossed his legs in an attempt to tamp down any arousal before it began.

“‘*This begs the question, what will the hardheaded leader of the BAU and the rest of the FBI do with their time when no longer faced with the task of indulging the cat and mouse game between these two passion-drive killers? As you know, this skeptical reporter initially had trouble taking these bureaucrats’ words of surrender at face value, but with no more evidence to be found and the trail of carnage growing colder every second, Tattle Crime may just have to put this one to bed for a while. But rest assured dear readers, should any more juicy details come to the surface about their Thelma and Louise ending, I will be ready to serve them to you hot off the online presses. I still have a nagging hunch that they may show up to liven the dry gossip well of Baltimore yet again*,’” Will read from Freddie’s article in the most sardonic of tones before closing the fabric cover of the tablet with an angry snap. “I don’t think we share the egotistical satisfaction of overhearing the gossip about ourselves in the hallways… I’d much rather fade into the wallpaper.”

“I’m afraid that is far from being possible at this point.” Hannibal took a sip of coffee and hid his smile behind the cup.

“Yeah well, a guy can dream…Jack knows.” Will leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “I mean…he doesn’t *know*, but he doesn’t think we died on that cliff. Knowing Kade Purnell, she probably wants this decisively wrapped up so the public can be enveloped in a security blanket knowing that Hannibal the Cannibal won’t be coming for their children in the night. She cares about image and PR more than she gives a shit about doing justice so she won’t fund any further investigation if they have nothing to go on. She won’t care about Jack’s misgivings.”

“I had the same thought. Jack would never consent to be quoted by Freddie unless he had an ulterior motive.” Hannibal reached for the tablet and brought it back to life with a touch of his fingertip. “‘*Will leaves behind many mourners. A wife, a child, friends who can’t believe it came to this. The most beloved stray of his pack, Winston, keeps looking for him. Wandering away from home in search of Will just like he did when he was wrongfully incarcerated. It’s an absolute tragedy.*’ He must think himself terribly clever for that little flourish.”

“You’re sure no one saw Chiyoh?” Will’s eyes flitted from Hannibal to the tablet and back again.

“Of course. No one sees Chiyoh unless she wishes for them to.” Hannibal ruffled Will’s hair and leisurely leaned back, arm draping around the back of the nook. “There is always the chance that we are reading too much into Uncle Jack’s comments.”

Hannibal didn’t sound like he really believed that, but Will appreciated the attempt to placate.

“Doubtful.” Will slumped forward, elbows resting on the tabletop as his fingers linked behind his neck.

“Perhaps, but time will plant the seeds of doubt, and he will eventually discard it as a coincidence. Pets run away from home all the time.” Hannibal planted a hand on Will’s upper back and began to work on a tight knot of muscle next to his shoulder blade.

“You shouldn’t have risked it.” Will slouched further, cheek meeting the cool, smooth surface of the table. “Not that I don’t appreciate it, of course. I’m extremely glad to have Winston here, but you shouldn’t have.”

“It was worth it to see the look of pure joy on your face.” Hannibal smiled down at him and dug his thumb into the tight muscle, rhythmically moving up and down in firm, long strokes.

Will moaned and squeezed his legs together as tightly as possible.

“Stop that,” He said weakly, choking down another soft moan.

“Why? Am I hurting you?” Hannibal sounded detached, but Will knew damn well that he was being conniving.

“No…you know why,” Will protested, halfheartedly shrugging his shoulders in an unsuccessful attempt to cast off Hannibal’s hand.

“You don’t like it?” The register of Hannibal’s voice dipped lower, a sensual purr that he was *absolutely* doing on purpose. He timed it perfectly with a downward motion of his hand, stopping to rub Will’s lower back. His hand was as close to Will’s ass as it could be without actually making contact.

“It’s making me want you,” Will whispered, limbs turning to water as he melted into the tabletop. The strategy of squeezing his knees together was backfiring. Every movement of his thighs, no matter how infinitesimal, resulted in frustratingly sweet friction.

Hannibal gripped Will’s knee with his free hard, prying Will’s legs apart and pushing his thigh down onto the cushioned seat. Will whined and bit his bottom lip. To his surprise, Hannibal didn’t stop rubbing his lower back. If anything he seemed to do it more vigorously, dexterous hands spreading out to make wider strokes, lingering longer and longer every time.

Will’s breath came faster and shallower, and still Hannibal remained impassive. Will made what he thought was an undetectable clench of his buttocks and inner thighs, and Hannibal slapped him on the thigh that he was still holding. Abruptly, he removed both of his hands, calmly picked up his coffee, and began to drink.

Will’s head shot up, and he gave Hannibal a dumbfounded look, catching his breath as though he was coming home from a long run. His hard cock bobbed between his open legs, lewdly obvious against the loose fabric of his boxers. He dutifully ignored it, but his mind was bursting with images of fucking Hannibal and being fucked by him in every possible permutation. Silently vowing not to lose at this game so easily, Will took a deep breath and sat upright.

“We never got to discuss your plans for Mr. Ritchie last night,” Hannibal finally spoke.

“Out of the two of us, I really didn’t expect to be the first one to suggest murdering a noisy neighbor in a fit of insomnia-induced rage…I don’t know…We were literally just talking about risks. I think you should ignore my outburst.” Will busied himself with the hem of his t-shirt, worrying the fabric between a calloused thumb and forefinger. Afraid to look up and find an expression of disappointment from Hannibal, he kept his eyes downcast.

“If that is what you feel is best.” Hannibal got up and walked around the kitchen island to the cupboards where he kept the pots and pans.

Will lifted his head and looked for any indication of tension in Hannibal’s broad back.

“Are you upset?”

Hannibal turned to look over his shoulder as he pulled a skillet down from the middle shelf. His facial features were maddeningly indecipherable, and the rhythmic thump of Will’s pulse quickened.

“Do you think that I should be?” Hannibal rounded the corner of the island and opened the stainless steel door of the fridge.

You would be like this now.

“You have spent many years getting me to a place where I would be receptive to doing this with you. *Should* isn’t the word I would choose, but *would* is.” Will stood up and walked over to the island, bracing the heels of his hands on the edge as he leaned over it.

Hannibal set down the eggs he had retrieved from the fridge and plucked a few tomatoes and an assortment of peppers from the counter behind him. His eyes darted over to Will’s quickly before he walked over to the sink and began to rinse the vegetables.

“Every man to die by your hands so far can be claimed as a necessity. Murders that, while driven far past the point of self-defense due to your rapturous enjoyment and, later, your brutality and capacity for cruelty…could still be argued away with excuses pertaining to how much of a threat they were to you at the time. Kill or be killed. Survival of the fittest. You *had* to. You had no *choice* in the matter.” Hannibal began to move about the kitchen with balletic grace as he prepped his ingredients, deveining and deseeding the jalapenos and habaneros. He mostly kept his eyes on the task, and the bite in his words didn’t sit well with Will.

“But you don’t believe that,” Will said flatly as he watched his hands dance across the cutting board. Hannibal wielding the sharp chef’s knife gave Will a shimmer of déjà vu. *You slice the ginger*.

“It hardly matters what I believe.” It was the closest to muttering that Will had ever heard Hannibal come.

“*Hannibal.*” Will walked closer to him and gripped his upper arm.

“No,” Hannibal said, finally halting his food prep and meeting Will’s gaze, “I believe we always have a choice. But I believe part of you still thinks of your murders in the aforementioned terms. So naturally the act of selecting a victim, and one who arguably isn’t deserving by society’s standards, is a hurdle for you. An obstacle I am very eager to help you surpass, but I do not want to project my own impulses onto you.”

“You’re not.” Will stood behind him and slipped his arms around his waist. He squeezed him reassuringly and rested his chin on Hannibal’s left shoulder.

“You cannot always distinguish between what it is your own and what whispers into your empathy from another.” Hannibal rested his head against Will’s and put down the knife so he could cover Will’s hands with his own.

“That was then and this is now, Hannibal. I know who I am, and I know how to separate the signals. I’m not saying I’ve completely perfected the off switch or ever will, but I’m a much different person now. Things aren’t as muddy as they once were.” Will held him tighter and nuzzled into his neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Will,” Hannibal whispered with a soft laugh. “I fear it may not be in my best interests to admit this, but you are the only one who can disarm me like that.”

“You *were* upset,” Will gently chided.

“I was *concerned*,” Hannibal clarified. He unwrapped Will’s arms from around his middle and turned to face him, cradling his cheek with a slightly damp palm. “I do not want you to retreat into thoughts of guilt nor do I wish for you to second guess your instincts. They are the most powerful innate gauges we are born with. You have only begun to hone yours. When they make themselves known, do not discount them. Embrace them with warm arms. Remember what I said; I am here to guide you in any way you may need.”

Will nodded and kissed Hannibal’s palm.

“What are you making?” He gestured to the cutting board, and Hannibal allowed the deflection for now.

“Shakshouka. An Israeli dish of eggs poached in a simmering tomato sauce seasoned with a variety of peppers to give it some heat. Usually finished with a topping of feta and chopped parsley.”

“I bet that smells wonderful on the stove.” Will backed away a couple steps and folded his arms over his chest, unsure what to say next.

Hannibal took the opportunity.

“Why don’t I finish cooking and then, over a late breakfast or early lunch depending on your perspective, you can tell me what plans popped into your mind last night. No pressure for you to act on them, no decisions to be made unless you choose so. Think of it as simply sharing your thoughts with me much as you would about anything else.” Hannibal closed the distance between them and rested his hand on the back of Will’s neck.

“You know that’s typically called brunch.” Will smiled wryly.

Hannibal quirked an eyebrow.

“A late breakfast that’s also an early lunch.”

“Oh yes…an ugly, detestable portmanteau. It evokes an image of socialites around a table of mimosas. I prefer not to use it.” The corners of Hannibal’s mouth twitched as he turned his attention back to the vegetables.

Will laughed.

“You’re so predictable sometimes. And yes, I would like that.”

Hannibal turned at the waist and examined Will’s face, gauging his sincerity.

“Telling you my…thoughts on the subject I mean…” Will elaborated. “I’d like that.”

_____

They dined in the sunroom. It was becoming a habit. Will had been surprised Hannibal had assented to it the first time he asked, assuming that it would offend his etiquette sensibilities. For his part, he *did* still insist on restricting dinner to the dining room, but he was flexible about breakfast and lunch and actually seemed to enjoy it. After the first time of awkwardly using end tables to balance plates and glasses, they had cleaned up the round glass table from the yard and brought it into the solarium as a permanent fixture.

Neither of them broached the subject for a few minutes, the calls of unfamiliar exotic birds and the nearby crashing of waves filling the silence. Just as Will was beginning to worry that he was going to have to initiate, Hannibal neatly wiped a corner of his mouth, folded the scarlet cloth napkin across his lap, and turned his penetrating gaze to Will's expressive blue eyes.

"What fire did Hamish Ritchie set ablaze with his presence, Will? How did it manifest? Take me through every minute step of the whirring connections your brain and heart made." Hannibal looked so captivated, eyes gleaming like the brilliance of sunlight reflecting off clear, sharp glass.

"Please…if you don't mind," He added in a respectful whisper, catching himself letting the enthusiasm leak out.

A slow smile spread across Will's pink lips. *Your lust is showing, Hannibal. Both your murder lust and your fucking lust…or is it all the same with you?*

"He is…" Will curved his fingers around his water glass and rotated the round cup a quarter turn on the smooth surface of the table, watching the distorted image of it filtering through the bottom, "empty."

He lifted his eyes to meet Hannibal's again and paused for effect. *Maybe I'll make you wait. After all, you're making me wait for something right now too.* Will ran the tip of his tongue along his bottom lip, from the left corner to the middle. Hannibal remained patient, hands folded in his lap and eyes steady, but Will could see the imperceptible twitch of his mouth and the tension in his jaw.

"A vessel god forgot to fill. He's not a sociopath, but he doesn't really form genuine connections either. His motivations are all superficial and monetary, and every connection he makes is for furthering that purpose. Hamish uses people like tools, like a means to an end that will serve his needs, and his *needs* are very narrow: to consume and discard. Rinse, repeat until he has reached the next bigger and better rung on the ladder to an imaginary pinnacle. The pinnacle is fictional because the accomplishments he desires aren't concrete; they aren't *goals* by any normal standard of achievement people adhere to. The incentive is

just to use and spend without an endgame, much like gambling isn't about money. No big win will ever be *enough* because that isn't what the objective really is."

"You believe there is a deeper pathology behind this rapacious behavior? An addiction of sorts perhaps?" Hannibal leaned back and crossed his legs, and suddenly it was like they were in Baltimore again. Will blinked and the chairs shifted to the comfortable black pair they used to sit in on opposing sides of the room. The white wall behind Hannibal oozed and dripped the rich, deep red of his old office walls until it was completely coated and dry. He blinked again, and everything was back to crisp, sun-soaked white.

"No. That's where the analogy ends because Hamish isn't afflicted with anything. At least not in the sense that there is something deeper to dissect. Some people are just lacking in some way. Bad manners at restaurants, indifference to children. Hamish apparently has dollar signs in place of his moral compass. It's mundane as far as shortcomings go. He isn't unique." The blue of Will's eyes had turned icy and hard. It made Hannibal smile.

"And you believe the world would be a better place without him marring its beautiful surface?" Hannibal steepled his fingers and watched Will closely.

"Since when is the betterment of society one of your criteria?" Will rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward.

"I am not the topic of discussion at the moment. You are."

"And that's what you think my rubric would contain?"

Hannibal canted his head to the side and paused.

"You have made mention of your standards deviating from mine."

"Did it surprise you when I said I wanted to kill Hamish?" Will sat up straighter, and the ice in his eyes melted away to leave something more affectionate.

"Did it surprise *you*?"

Classic Hannibal.

"Yes, but not in the way you might think." Will leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach. He taunted Hannibal with a pause, only continuing when he saw that anticipatory, hopeful glint return to his eye. "I was surprised by how much I didn't care that my standards seemed to have drastically shifted…and that what I *did* care about was whether or not he was worthy of being our first jointly chosen victim."

Hannibal grinned slyly.

"Perception is everything, Will. The lens through which we interpret all sensory information and catalogue it according to previous experience and our own personal principles of judgment. These principles stretch and bend when new experiences test their veracity. Our beliefs are shaken, altered, and born anew to reflect that which has happened to us. You have evolved, Will. Are *continuing* to even as we speak, and it is an exceptional pleasure to be the

sole person to truly witness it." Hannibal slowly wet his lips. Combined with the look of sheer pride and desire on his face, the gesture surged through Will's blood, liquid heat that traveled straight to his neglected cock.

Let's see just how stellar your control is, Dr. Lecter.

Will got up from his chair and walked around to the opposite side of the table. After they finished eating, Hannibal had scooted his chair away from the table to relax into the early afternoon sun so there was enough space for Will to tuck himself in-between. Eyes lascivious and wet lips parted invitingly, Will knelt down in front of Hannibal and placed warm palms on either of his thighs.

"Are you intentionally defying our agreement, Will?" Hannibal's eyes traveled up and down Will's body, a curious smile painting his lips.

"Are you *sure* you don't want to make me choke on your cock right now?" Will purred. He bit the flesh of his bottom lip and stroked his palms up and down Hannibal's thighs. "I know how thinking about me…*evolving* makes you feel, Hannibal. You might not show your emotions freely to most, but I'm not *most* people, am I?"

Hannibal didn't make any indication to encourage him, but he didn't remove Will's hands either.

"What is your plan for him, Will?" He asked coolly, hands stock still in his lap.

"This isn't the only place he disappears to for a debauched vacation. Guy like him is the 'weekend warrior' type, pushing all hedonistic enjoyment to the limit before heading back to work on Monday. Except men like that can never contain their extracurricular activities due to a lack of conscience or sense of obligation so I'm betting weekends are stretching into the week now. He's probably late 30s-early 40s so he's been at it a while; it's catching up to him. Maybe he's even on the verge of losing his status at the firm if he's not already high up enough to be able to cover up his lifestyle with ease and delegate to the lesser employees he sees as expendable." Will closed his eyes and stopped rubbing Hannibal's legs, hands coming to rest in the middle of his thighs. "I bet he's gone 'missing' before only to turn up whiskey-soaked and stumbling a week later. I bet he's done it enough that anyone who previously raised concerns about him has become the boy who cried wolf."

Will opened his eyes and met Hannibal's warm, honey colored gaze.

"I bet no one would suspect anything had happened to Hamish Ritchie for a long time after he met an 'unfortunate' end, and furthermore I bet very few people, if *any*, would really care enough to make the level of noise that forces the authorities to listen. I don't like the idea of doing it now because it invites questioning if someone *does* file a missing person's report. We're the nearest neighbors to his vacation house, and I don't particularly like the idea of policemen knocking on our door so soon even if I'm sure you would know exactly how to charm them into discarding us as suspects…He works in Abidjan. You have his business card. I say we follow him until we find out his routine. Kill him on a Friday when he's out of town so suspicions won't arise until Monday at the earliest."

Hannibal carded a hand through Will's hair, and he leaned into the touch. It sent jolts of electricity through his bones after so little contact over the past couple days.

"My clever boy…tell me, how would you kill him?" Hannibal's breath was quickening, his enthralled eyes fixed on Will.

Will glanced down at Hannibal's lap and saw the hard line of his cock straining against the fine weave of his trousers. He grinned, a devious, triumphant thing, and resumed running his hands along Hannibal's thighs, teasing fingers dipping ever closer to his erection.

"I…" Will hesitated, forehead wrinkling as he frowned.

Hannibal lifted Will's chin with his fingers.

"Tell me, please," he breathed.

"I think it's a little too on the nose…I don't know." Will shyly averted his eyes.

"You are much too self-effacing for how brilliant you are." Hannibal smiled lovingly. "Do not be nervous, Will."

"I would inject him with something valuable. Melted gold perhaps. Let it solidify in his veins and smother him from within, choking his blood stream with what he so desperately craves to fill the holes inside him."

Hannibal's smile broadened, and he stroked Will's cheek with a firm thumb.

"The metaphorical becomes literal. Filling the proverbially empty man until he bursts at the seams."

"Yes," Will hissed. He rose from his position on the floor and sat on Hannibal's lap, grinding down lightly. "I would take the heart he wasn't using anyway, and I would display him like Midas made a fool by Dionysus."

Hannibal gasped, and Will rolled his hips harder. Hannibal's hands gripped Will's shoulders, thumbs digging in just below the clavicles.

"What a remarkable vision you have." Hannibal clamped a hand around the back of Will's neck and drew him closer until the tips of their noses were nudging, hot breath mingling between mouths. "I have *yearned* to see the poetic cruelty within you, hoped to see your potential flourish without impediment, your vibrant wings spread out before me like so many shards of vitrified sand after a lightning storm, mesmerizingly beautiful and lethal."

"*Hannibal...please*…" Will whined, so painfully hard and overwhelmingly feverish at the thought of their future conquest. They both needed this so much, had consummated in so many ways already but the deep seated craving for this shared experience was still eating at them, a wild animal threatening to claw its way out if not fed and appeased. He pawed at the collar of Hannibal's shirt, and closed the miniscule distance between them to kiss him. But as Will's lips grazed his, the tip of his tongue tracing the curve of Hannibal's mouth in a tantalizingly light caress, Hannibal pulled away.

Before Will had time to process what was happening, Hannibal had removed him from his lap, stood up from his place at the table, and put considerable distance between them. Those quick, stealthy maneuvers were always an unsettling reminder of how dangerous he could be.

“While I realize that I am every bit as culpable in the temporary dissolution of our contract as you are, I will not permit it to continue.” Without anything further on the subject, Hannibal avoided eye contact with Will, gathered the plates from the sunroom table, and walked to the kitchen.

Will laughed in disbelief and turned around to follow him.

“You’re ridiculous.” It came out bubbling with more spite than he had intended.

“Am I?” Hannibal said nonchalantly, his back to Will as he rinsed the plates in the sink. Although he concealed it from Will, it took a few seconds to regain his breath.

“Remind me why we’re doing this again?” Will sighed, vexed by the lack of release.

Hannibal turned off the faucet and spun around. He looked slightly aggravated at Will’s question, arms crossed as he leaned his back against the edge of the sink.

“Testing the limits of your control, quieting your mind by handing over the reins to someone else for a change. No need to worry about anything but instruction and imposed restriction. No need to wring your hands in anxiety over anything as your focus will be so singular that your thoughts will have nowhere to wander.” Hannibal’s countenance softened as he explained himself. It was clear he meant this as a way to take care of Will, but it wasn’t going according to plan.

“I don’t feel very…” Will ran his tongue along the sharp points of his incisors and let out a deep exhale “*singular*.”

“I know, and I am to blame for that. I became rather…distracted.” Hannibal’s serious tone broke on ‘distracted’, the corners of his mouth fighting a smile. “I assure you that it will not happen again.”

Will laughed, and there was no bitterness in the sound this time.

“Well, I did my best to become an exceptional distraction.” Will strolled over to Hannibal and leaned against the kitchen island opposite the sink.

“But I believe I am supposed to possess much more than a modicum of resistance in such instances. Otherwise I have no business claiming a role I cannot fulfill.” Hannibal smiled remorsefully.

Will chuckled again and shook his head.

“What is it, dear Will?”

“Have you done…this sort of thing before?” He was reluctant to put a definitive name to it.

“No, we are delving into the dark together on this venture.” Hannibal being Hannibal, he didn’t look any less sure of himself even though he was admitting he was less than an expert in this area.

“Really?! You’re very…imposing. You’re pretty naturally built to be an excellent dom.” Will’s cheeks flushed at the blatant acknowledgement of what they were doing. “It makes me more comfortable though…knowing that this is new for you too. Unexpected but comforting…So you really never…”

Will awkwardly scratched the back of his neck, head bent toward the floor.

“Minimally. But as I have briefly touched on, I never acquired sexual partners with the intent of longevity. Dominance and submission, if *properly* approached, require a certain… familiarity and trust with one another to be successful in my opinion. I never felt that with anyone nor was it an option that I considered feasible until you. Additionally, although some might consider the submissive to be the role that requires the rawest exhibition of one’s inner self, I think sexual behavior as a whole is an extremely revealing portion of human nature. I felt it best not to expose the beast in a way that could lead to potential revelation. While it is doubtful I would have met anyone as boxing clever as you,” Hannibal smirked fondly and Will returned it, “exercising caution was still the wisest course of action.”

“And here you were lamenting about what a terrible shame it was that *I* was living such a dull sexual life until you came along,” Will teased. He shifted his stance, shoulders hunching more, head bowing slightly, eyes enticingly coy and half-lidded. “What do you want me to do for you, Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal’s face lit up at the manipulative display of vulnerability from Will. He was being painfully obvious, but neither of them cared.

“Kneel at my feet while I wash the dishes. Do not speak unless addressed, do not touch me unless asked, and do not move unless told to do so.” They locked eyes, quietly assessing one another. Hannibal’s expression was domineering once again, and Will drank from it like a fountain on a sweltering day.

He nodded, foregoing any verbal acknowledgement already. Hannibal nodded back and without further discussion, he turned back to the dirty dishes as Will sank to his knees beside him. Being told that he couldn’t touch Hannibal was like the sudden deprivation of a favorite food; it immediately became all he could think about, eyes drawn to the soft concave of the backs of his knees, the defined line of his quadriceps, the slim elegance of his socked ankle peeking out from between the edge of his pants and the shiny top of his brown oxfords. When Hannibal deposited a plate in-between the metal slats of the drying rack to the left of the sink and brushed a damp hand through Will’s curls, his moan was less one of pleasure and more of tightly coiled tension leaving the body. He had to suppress the zealous “thank you” perched on the tip of his tongue.

Not speaking was much less of a hindrance. Will excelled at not engaging. Years of avoiding social situations and living in a secluded area with only the company of his loyal canines had made silence a comfortable zone to occupy. He could go much longer than most without feeling a creeping unease and need to communicate. As the quiet enveloped him like a

comforting blanket, he wondered if that was Hannibal's aim after all. It was soothing to sit at Hannibal's feet with only the rhythmic sound of the faucet and Hannibal's graceful hands as he soaped and rinsed the dishes filling his ears. It wasn't long before he forgot all about the cessation of touch and found himself nearly lulled to sleep by the sound of the water, eyes fluttering closed as he pictured a rushing river flowing past his ankles. The noise abruptly ceased as Hannibal turned off the tap, and Will's eyelids jolted open.

Hannibal extended a hand for Will to take. Sliding his hand into the offered palm, Will rose to his feet, wincing as his knees cracked.

"My apologies. Next time I will have the foresight to lay down a cushion for you." Hannibal gave him a small, genuine smile and ran warm fingers down the side of his face.

Will smiled back and nodded to let him know it was okay.

"Come with me into the living room." Hannibal clasped his hand and led the way. He sat in one of the red velvet chairs and picked up the book on the table beside it. "Sit on the floor at my feet in whatever position is most comfortable for you. You may put your head on my knee if you wish."

Will sat on the floor, knees bent and feet tucked to the side. He gratefully accepted the option of resting his head on Hannibal's knee, sighing happily as he felt fingertips gently massaging the base of his scalp. Winston wondered in and jumped onto the other chair. Will pressed his lips together to swallow the laugh bubbling up his throat. *I guess I look like the dog in this scenario*. Somehow the thought didn't bother him. He didn't feel degraded or upset. Just calm.

He wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, Will at Hannibal's feet as he read. The passage of time was a concept he surrendered at some point, falling once again into a semi-trance as he had in the kitchen. Images drifted by in that shimmery haze of relaxation just before sleep, everything half-defined and beautifully ghostly. Will was still aware of everything around him though; he didn't have the sense that he would descend into an unconscious state but rather stay suspended just above it, floating in the stream.

"Will." Hannibal's voice drifted into his ears, lilting and soothing. A hand smoothed the hair back from his forehead. "You may get up now if you like."

"Mmm don't want to yet." Will hugged Hannibal's calf before realizing with a start what he was doing. "I'm sorry. Can I touch you?"

Hannibal looked at Will's obedient, bright-eyed expression and nearly gasped with fondness.

"Yes, you may. No higher than my knee though and only for a few more minutes. I have one more request for you tonight."

"Okay." Will tried not to wonder what the remaining task was, but once Hannibal had let the foreshadowing slip, it was all he could think about. Would Hannibal dole out punishment for trying to bait him into violating the terms earlier? Did Will *want* that?

“Alright, my relaxation bubble has officially burst.” Will stood up and arched his back to stretch out the numbness. “What do you want me to do?”

“It was not my intention to unsettle you. I assure you that what I have planned will not require much from you. Only a bit of patience, and you have done very well with that thus far.” Hannibal rose from his chair and turned toward the stairs. As he ascended them, he called over his shoulder, “Go to the sunroom and wait for me.”

Will made his way to the solarium and flopped onto the chaise with a tiny groan. The serenity of earlier had been replaced with his usual rapid fire train of thoughts, and the uncertainty of what would come next was buzzing in his ear like a persistent mosquito. When he heard the creak of Hannibal’s footsteps on the wooden staircase, he snapped to attention. Sitting up straight, he chuckled to himself. The automatic tractability was strange. He couldn’t isolate the reason for it. Being defiant and obstinate was truer to Will’s nature, and his behavior around Hannibal was usually no exception. This feeling of wanting to please and be good for him without the context of sex was a little uncomfortable, and he silently cursed Hannibal for being prescient enough to know that Will would like it.

Hannibal entered the room with a large drawing pad in hand along with a few sharp pencils of various sizes.

“Remove all your clothes, please.” Hannibal set the materials down on the table in the middle of the room and watched Will with an unnerving intensity.

Will immediately blushed but began to unbutton his shirt anyway. He looked out the window, nervously scanning for any people wandering onto the property. He knew in the back of his rational mind that they were remote enough for there to be no need to worry, but the embarrassment and anxiety still fell over him like an oppressive curtain. Down to his underwear now, he halted.

“Do we have to do this…here?” He swept a hand toward the unobstructed view and turned back to Hannibal with pleading eyes.

“Yes, there is excellent light in this room. By far the best location in the house,” Hannibal stated pragmatically. “Finish undressing and lie on your side facing me. I would like to do this while the sun is still high. The lighting will change quite a bit in an hour or so.”

Swallowing his timidity, Will removed his boxers and lied down on the chaise.

Hannibal regarded him clinically, no arousal to be found in his face. He was an artist evaluating how to best portray his subject. Tilting his head, he assessed the positioning before approaching the chaise and moving Will like a bendable doll. He bent the arm underneath him at the elbow, tucking Will’s forearm behind his head. The other arm was placed over his stomach, fingers splayed a few inches over his navel. Hannibal tilted his whole body back at an awkward angle, Will sucking in a breath as he fretted about how long he would be made to remain in this position. His legs were bent at the knee, the top leg scooted down a few inches more than the bottom one, the foot of the bottom wrapped around the back of the top calf.

Will flushed a deep scarlet as Hannibal made the finishing touches on the arrangement of his limbs. Hannibal's lips upturned at the sight.

"Are you embarrassed, Will? You should not be. You are a superbly striking man."

"Stop. That just makes it worse." Will squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to move.

Hannibal laughed softly and walked over to the chair he had moved askew to achieve the perfect view. He got to work, and Will opened his eyes cautiously. The older man was very focused, facial muscles drawn tight, eyes sharp as he sketched.

"Isn't this kind of sexual? Doesn't this break the rules?" Will queried a few minutes later.

"Is all nude art sexual, Will? How very puritanical of you. Also, the orders were regarding touch. I did not specify any optical terms." Hannibal didn't look up from his drawing pad where he was carefully erasing some small detail.

"I'm not talking about nude art as a whole. I'm talking about this particular nude art."

Hannibal glanced up to study a portion of Will's lower body before turning back to the page, and Will blushed all over again.

"No, I am not executing this drawing for a sexual purpose. I find your form to be artistically inspirational; I always have. I have drawn you many times before but have not had the opportunity to do so with your cooperation. My acquaintance with your body has grown quite intimate so I suppose there is a carnal connection to be found concerning just *how* I am afforded this opportunity…I will gladly answer any questions you may have later, but I need to focus my attention on the task at hand right now. Be a good boy for me and stay very quiet and still." Hannibal's voice was low and sensual as he uttered that command, flashing Will a quick smile before returning to his work.

No sexual purpose, my ass.

Eventually, the quiet became tranquil as it had before, and Will began to bask in the attention rather than being consumed by mortification. The atmosphere of the room was saturated with Hannibal: his love, his possessiveness, his admiration for Will's body. Gradually, Will felt less like an object being observed with indifference and more like a beautiful thing for Hannibal to treasure. It was always odd to see himself this way; no one else had ever treated him like an aesthetic rarity. While he couldn't see it in his current position, he felt the blood rushing to his cock and debated whether or not to apologize.

"It's quite alright, Will," Hannibal clairvoyantly said with a self-satisfied smirk. "I am very nearly finished."

This was your intent all along, you smug bastard.

Not long after Will began to lose his ability to ignore the ache in his shoulder and the taut stretch of his abdomen, Hannibal announced that he was done.

Will uncoiled his body from the chaise, groaning as he rolled his shoulders and shook the feeling back into his arms. Hannibal came over to sit beside him and unveil the drawing. As to be expected, it was incredibly meticulous and well-done. Looking at it almost made Will see what Hannibal saw in him.

“Do you approve?” Hannibal handed the pad to Will and rubbed his shoulders and upper arms, coaxing the muscles back to life.

“You made me look…much better than I have any right to,” Will laughed.

“Nonsense. You are always stunning, my darling,” Hannibal whispered, lips tickling Will’s earlobe. Will’s arousal pooled in his belly, and an uncontrollable moan escaped his lips.

“Fuck, Hannibal…how much longer?” Will leaned into the hands that were still massaging his shoulders and fought the urge to spin around and claim his mouth. “Do you want me to beg you? You know I will if that’s what you want. I’ll love doing it too.”

Will knew he sounded completely shameless, but he didn’t care.

“Not long, I promise.” Hannibal chastely kissed his temple and wrapped his arms around the younger man’s waist. “You’ve been such a good boy for me today. So patient and accommodating. I will reward you soon.”

“I’m surprised I…” *Surprised that I like this?* No, that wasn’t quite right. Will rearranged his thoughts. “Surprised at how all this made me feel.”

“Let’s get you somewhere more comfortable, and then I should like to hear more about that.” Hannibal ruffled his hair and then got up to gather Will’s clothes from the floor. He motioned with his head for Will to follow him upstairs to the bedroom.

Will hadn’t noticed he was still clutching the drawing pad. He smiled down at it before carefully placing it on the nightstand and lying on his back atop the comforter. He thought about putting his clothes back on, but the day was creeping into the upper 80s and the breeze from the windows felt good on his naked skin.

To Will’s surprise, Hannibal stripped down to his underwear before getting in bed next to him. Hannibal noticed Will’s questioning look.

“It is a rather insufferably humid day.” He offered by way of explanation. Hannibal turned on his side to face Will but didn’t touch save for a light hand on his arm.

“How did today make you feel?”

Will sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and pushed it out again, shiny and wet, taking a few head-clearing breaths before he spoke.

“Calm…happy…frustrated…impatient…” Will turned his head to meet Hannibal’s eyes.

“And which of those would be the unexpected emotions?” Hannibal raised an eyebrow, and Will thought maybe for once he truly didn’t know.

“The former two.” Will reached a hand across his body and threaded his fingers with Hannibal’s.

“Really?” Hannibal made an amused huff. “Some of your preferences during sex would suggest that enjoyment of today’s events would not come as a shock.”

“It’s different…being obedient with no end game, I guess? Not that I feel selfish when we’re having sex. I like giving as much as receiving, but it’s…an interesting situation to be offering something to you in a way that has sexual overtones but isn’t explicitly sexual…if that makes sense.”

“It does.” Hannibal nodded and slid closer to Will, his torso brushing against Will’s side. “We assume one to go hand in hand with the other. Being told to ignore the sexual association is an adjustment that requires mental acuity and discipline. I imagine it takes practice like anything else.”

“It felt very…performative. But not in a patronizing, trained seal kind of way. Like being the center of attention but not. My job was mostly to be mute and in the background and the way events unfolded was entirely up to you, but it was also about how I responded *to* you. It was like…” Will chewed on his lip and tried to choose the right words. “The trajectory of the whole day was mysterious, but I didn’t care because I trusted you. And I liked leaving it up to you. I wouldn’t want to all the time, but it was a nice break from my own brain. You were right about that.”

“Is it an area you would like to continue to explore?” Hannibal extricated his fingers from Will’s and stroked his chest.

“Yes. Definitely,” Will smiled and promptly felt embarrassed again. He threw his forearm over his eyes and groaned. “I’d tell you to stop making me feel ashamed and self-conscious, but we both know that’s not what I really want.”

Hannibal’s grin turned so blatantly libidinous Will felt dirty just looking at it.

“How kind of you to own up to it so directly. My lovely boy…I will not delay gratification any longer if you have reached your limit. You have done very well for your first time,” Hannibal planted a series of feathery kisses down the length of Will’s neck.

“So have you.” Will removed his arm and raised a flirty eyebrow.

“Am I correctly sensing a bit of self-righteousness in that remark?” He playfully bit Will’s earlobe and tickled the area just above his hipbone.

Will squirmed and swatted his wrist.

“You can’t really blame me. You tend to be intimidatingly experienced and self-possessed. The opportunity to watch you experience something new is pretty scarce…and it makes me less insecure about how *I’m* doing.” Will gently pushed Hannibal’s mouth away from his neck. “Don’t…not yet. It’s still early. We’ll both be awake for hours. Let’s try for the rest of tonight?”

Hannibal canted his head, taken aback but clearly immensely thrilled as well, eyes bright with awe.

“I will gladly oblige.” Hannibal withdrew, creating a foot or so of space between them on the bed.

“And Hannibal?”

“Yes?”

“When the time comes, make *damn* sure I beg you.” When Will’s eyes found Hannibal’s, there was no room for interpretation. *Make me yours and don’t make it easy.*

“I have the utmost faith that you will.” Hannibal swallowed, hungry eyes roaming up and down Will’s body before he got up from the bed and began to get dressed. “Are you in need of anything before we begin? Water, food, fresh air? I would suggest taking a recess now as it will be a few hours before you can again.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the update! I actually have the rough draft for chapter six finished so pretty jazzed about getting that together a little faster than this one. It's...basically all smut and angst. Sorry not sorry. :P

As always, mucho thanks to @castellomargot for beta-ing! It's absolutely essential help.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

smut and angst smut and angst, that's all you're gonna find in this chapter. :D

As always, comments and kudos give me life. I hope everything is being handled appropriately with the turn the story is taking!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why did I have to suggest extending this through tonight?” Will blew a puff of air toward the ceiling and rotated his wrists, testing the tensile strength of the silk bonds. They were tight but not cutting off his circulation as far as he could tell. For now anyway. The cushioned black mask was soft and cool over his eyes. His heartbeat thumped in his chest either fervently or nervously (he wasn’t quite sure which) as both emotions vied for supremacy within him.

“Because you are curious where the limits of your stamina lie, as am I. And because you knew you had not reached them yet.”

He could tell from the sound of his voice that Hannibal was somewhere near the foot of the bed. Instinctively Will tried to cover up to escape the heat of his prying eyes, but the best he could do was cross his legs which Hannibal promptly remedied by forcing them apart with strong hands. Before he bound his arms, Hannibal had ordered Will to strip just as he had in the sunroom earlier that day. Except this time he had been less passive in his observation, the burning intensity of his lascivious gaze never letting up as he focused on every inch of skin as it was unveiled. The answering blush from Will was a fierce scarlet, and he found that he was grateful when Hannibal slid the blindfold into place.

“Should I – ”

“NO.” The terseness of that one syllable stunned Will. If he were capable, he would have flinched at the sound of his own voice. Hannibal cupped Will’s cheek and waited.

“I mean…fuck, I guess it’s up to you, right? And how much worse could it be? I’m already halfway there.” Will tapped his knuckles against the obsidian wood of the headboard.

“Do you remember your safeword?” Will could feel Hannibal’s warm breath on his neck now and knew he was close. He listened carefully for any clues as to Hannibal’s state of mind. Was he impervious to the sight of Will trussed and on display like a sumptuous meal or was he too struggling for dominion over his emotions?

“Wendigo.” Will nodded.

“Then I presume you will use it should the need arise. I am going to tie your ankles now.”

Will heard the muted rustle of fabric and felt something smooth wrapping around his left ankle. He laughed abruptly, and there was a pause in the process.

“You are amused at the most curious junctures, dear Will.” Will could hear the smile in his voice.

“Sorry, I was just wondering how you could tell how tight to tie these without asking me. And then I realized that lack of BDSM experience or not, you definitely have a lot of experience tying people up.” *And it’s absurd that I trust you to do this despite knowing that.*

“Are you frightened? Do you worry I will hurt you in a way you do not desire?” Will recoiled at the gravelly voice in his ear. Hannibal was always unnervingly light on his feet, and Will hadn’t heard a single sound to indicate that he was no longer at the other end of the bed.

“Some part of me always will be,” Will whispered, pulse beating thickly in his throat.

“And yet the unpredictability excites you instead of being a deterrent. That reckless part of you always simmering under the surface,” Hannibal nosed against the crook of Will’s neck and kissed the pulse point.

“You know better than anyone…” Will rasped quietly.

“There are safe ways to indulge that urge. This is one of them.” Even though he still heard nothing, he could feel the absence of Hannibal’s warmth when he moved away.

“What now?” Will tried to abolish any anxiety from his voice, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

“I’m going to leave the room for a while. I will not venture far. Call for me if you need me. I will check on you often.” Hannibal kissed his forehead, and Will felt “wendigo” on the tip of his tongue as the imprint of those warm lips faded, sealing his fate.

Something stopped him from verbalizing it. Maybe curiosity winning out over apprehension, maybe a need to prove himself, he wasn’t entirely sure. He focused on his breathing, feeling every inch of the inflation of his lungs more acutely than usual as it was nearly the only movement he was able to perform. Will pictured himself as he would appear to Hannibal right now and involuntarily squirmed in humiliation laced with excitement, tender wrists and ankles pulling at the restraints. Hannibal’s face appeared in his mind’s eye, lustful and arrogant, drunk with satisfaction from leading Will to expose himself so thoroughly. And Will *was* sure he had been led to this, groomed and fed subtle suggestions over time as Hannibal always did. But this time it was different. This time it actually felt like preparation rather than manipulation, and Will was grateful for being eased into it instead of thrown flailing into the fire.

He imagined Hannibal traveling in a slow circle from the left side of the bed around to the right, hands clasped behind his back as he appreciatively surveyed his territory. Will *did* feel like Hannibal’s territory in this state, limbs spread-eagled, semi-hard cock out in the open,

half of his senses deprived as he waited at the mercy of the older man. Would he even hear Hannibal when he re-entered the room? Or would he continue to be silent as a prowling feline, a sadistic voyeur smirking in the dark as he ogled his defenseless, unsuspecting lover? Perhaps he would test Will's awareness and hover his fingers just above the trembling skin of his stomach, electrons firing but never colliding. If he never made a sound, Will might never know how close he was to administering that sweet relief.

Hannibal's salacious timbre echoed in the halls of his imagination. *Spread your legs for me. Wider. Show me, Will.* Will sighed softly, the many ways Hannibal could command him, *own* him, running across his mind in heated flashes. He felt impatience growing, and then the faintest of footsteps disrupted his thoughts.

"Hannibal?" Will sounded winded, voice full of nervous passion as he braced himself for an unknown outcome.

"What have you been thinking about in your idle time?" Will felt the bed dip as Hannibal sat beside him.

"You," Will sighed, tilting his head toward the direction he perceived Hannibal to be.

"*Good*," he whispered, fingertips lightly trailing along the smile on Will's stomach. Will gasped, the unexpected contact as sensitive as stinging icicles on his skin after being denied for however long he had been lying there. An hour? Two? Only a few minutes? He wanted to ask and yet he almost preferred not to know. It was heartwarming that Hannibal had chosen that spot to touch first. To Will, it felt like Hannibal saying *I love you* with his fingers, silently drawing attention to an intimate part of their history, a reassurance that make his blood sing.

"Always so responsive to my hands," Hannibal mused, fingers drifting from his stomach to the crease of his right thigh.

"Well, that's what experiencing a deficit of something does," Will spat out sarcastically.

Hannibal made him pay for that in the form of two sharp raps to the creamy flesh of his inner thighs. Will drew in a ragged breath and clenched the muscles of his lower body.

"You dare to be insolent while you are bound at the wrists and ankles, at my mercy and unable to contest anything to which I may choose to subject you?" His voice remained steady, and Will was sure Hannibal's heartrate would be too if he could check it right now, that naturally intimidating composure always present.

"I wonder if you are capable of anything else." Hannibal grabbed a handful of Will's hair and pulled his head to the side.

"I am…" Will panted. Hannibal's fist tightened, twisting the curls around his knuckles until Will could feel the skin on the back of his neck pulling so taut he let out a sharp pained noise.

"Dr. Lecter," he added in an almost indistinguishable rush of syllables. *Doctorlecter*.

“Good boy,” Hannibal praised, loosening his grip but not letting go. “Should I leave you here to dwell in exigency with no hope for reprieve? Let you lie stagnant and wondering, drowning in want without the promise of relief all night?”

“No, don’t. Please, Dr. Lecter,” Will abandoned all pretense of self-control, his voice pathetic with need.

“And why shouldn’t I?” Hannibal released Will’s hair, hand grazing the long side of his neck and resting on his collarbone. “You took the very first chance you had to be rude and sardonic. Go on Will, make your case.”

Will turned his head, lips straining to make contact with any part of Hannibal’s hand, but he swiftly moved it out of reach to leave behind a whimpering, bereft Will.

“Because I’ll do whatever you want. I said I would beg, and I will. *I am*. Don’t leave,” Will was amazed to hear how compliant and demure he sounded. Even more startling was how much he didn’t feel ashamed because of it. His leaking cock lay heavy on his belly, and he writhed as much as his bonds would allow, banking on appearing irresistible to Hannibal. “I’ll be good for you. *Please*.”

“And what if this is what I want? To see how long you can withstand this torturous denial until you shout the word that guarantees your release?” Hannibal’s voice rumbled low and dark, his palm meeting Will’s skin again, sliding down his chest until his thumb brushed the base of Will’s erection.

“Okay,” Will breathily agreed. It was a shame to be blindfolded. Seeing Hannibal’s smile would have been such a delicious reward. “I want to give you what you want. No matter what it is.”

“Look at you. Spread open for me so lewdly, acquiescing to such a wanton display of exhibitionism. All for me. No one else. You would not even entertain the idea if someone else proposed it, would you? Would dismissively scoff at the prospect without hesitation.”

“*Yes*.” Will listened eagerly, devouring the subtle shift in the cadence of Hannibal’s words, the almost soundless stutter in the rhythm of his breath. He might have missed it if he hadn’t been attuned to every small noise around him, his senses starved to the point of being amplified.

“Perhaps if you’re a very patient boy, I won’t make this take all night,” Hannibal traced a fingertip along the underside of Will’s cock and ran it over the top of the silky head. Will shivered as he heard the sound of Hannibal suckling the precome from his finger. “But you will have to prove that you can be.”

“Of course, doctor,” Will practically sobbed, arousal coursing agonizingly through his over-sensitive skin.

“I am leaving the room again, but I will be able to hear should you call for me.”

Will whined as he listened to Hannibal's retreating footsteps. The second time was harder. His endurance was tested as he tried to compartmentalize the pervasive itch of frustration that kept cropping up. Conjuring every comforting image he had utilized to empty his mind in the past, Will sifted through them like slides in a projector and tried to mollify himself with memories of fly fishing and cold, meditative winter walks with the dogs. But his thoughts always turned back to Hannibal: Hannibal's mouth on him, Hannibal taunting him with teasingly brief touches as he arched off the bed as much as his restraints would allow, desperately seeking more.

The pressure on the fine bones of his wrists and ankles began to ache, the soft edges of the silk transforming into the kiss of a knife. Will thrashed ineffectually for a second, instantly regretting it as the knots slid tighter. Will groaned, feeling like an imbecile for trying in the first place. He knew he couldn't get away so why fight like an ignorant animal in captivity? *Because you've run out of distractions.*

He made a helpless sound and suddenly hands were steadying arms he didn't know were quivering.

"*Beautiful*," Hannibal whispered in an entranced tone, "the next time I draw you it will be like this. Restrained, naked, raw and laid bare in all ways. How are you feeling, Will?"

"Tired. Restless…like I've exhausted all patience and methods of clearing my spinning head. That's what you wanted, isn't it? I clutter it up until it's pushing at the edges, and then you come in to sweep it all away?" Will's voice wasn't challenging. He was genuinely curious.

Hannibal didn't answer, and Will wondered if he was grinning devilishly in the dark, sharp features ghoulishly illuminated by moonlight. A hand swept over the curve of his hip bone and down his inner thigh, nails scratching in a pressure just on the edge of painful as they made their way down.

"Is that what you desire? For me to sweep it all away, Will?" He sounded soft and warm, and Will ached to see him, touch him.

"Yes," Will croaked.

"Trust is the ultimate expression of love. Giving it and receiving it. *Allowing* it. Confiding in another and entrusting them with full purview of your very essence is both profound and hazardous." Hannibal's hand traveled back up Will's thigh and wrapped firmly around his cock. He pumped up and down in slow, deliberate strokes. Will moaned, a weighty sigh of relief that he felt in his very bones as it left his parched mouth. "I can do with you as I please right now. Your trust has been distilled into its purest form at this moment."

Hannibal removed his hand from Will's hard cock as soon as he began to relax into the touch. Will grunted his irritation and sank further into the sheets.

"Please…Dr. Lecter, don't stop touching me," Will pleaded.

"I believe your instructions were for me to *make damn sure you beg*. I find that to be rather unequivocal, don't you?" Hannibal sounded almost callous, and it only made Will's blood

pump that much harder.

“I *am* begging. *Please.* I need to *feel* you,” Will panted, rotating his head as though that would make any difference in what he could see. It was pitch black no matter how he angled. The mask didn’t allow for any accidental light to peek through.

“I can arrange for that,” Hannibal purred.

Will felt knees nudging his ribs on either side and was surprised to feel skin against skin. Hannibal must have undressed before he came in or maybe Will was so overwhelmed that he really couldn’t hear anything around him anymore. Long fingers ran along Will’s plush lips.

“Open your mouth,” Hannibal commanded, and Will obeyed. “Suck.”

Will eagerly licked and sucked Hannibal’s fingers, moaning around the welcome intrusion. Hannibal started to thrust them into his mouth, and Will relaxed his jaw, letting Hannibal use him.

“Such a very good boy for me,” Hannibal said lovingly, petting his hair. He removed his fingers, and Will’s breath came shallow and quick as he waited to see what would happen next. Something warm and smooth brushed across Will’s moist lips, and his tongue darted out to trace the edge of it. He recognized the shape of it as belonging to the head of Hannibal’s cock, and he moaned at the realization of what Hannibal intended. Will jerked back painfully against the silk ties as Hannibal’s hand came down hard on his left side, just below the ribs. “I don’t recall asking for that.”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted…you feel so good. I *want* you. I’m sorry, doctor,” Will repented, wishing he wasn’t blindfolded so Hannibal could see his eyes and know he meant it. He tried to pour all the lamentation into his voice as best he could to compensate.

“Do you want me in your mouth, Will? Filling you, pressing at the back of your throat?” The tip of Hannibal’s cock met Will’s mouth again, and he dutifully kept his tongue pressed against the back of his teeth.

“Yes yes *please*. Use my mouth,” Will whined frantically, undone.

Hannibal withdrew, knees sliding back a few inches on the sheets.

“Goddamnit,” Will tried to smack his fists against the headboard, but all he could do was halfheartedly flick his wrists so his knuckles clattered against the wood. He opened his mouth to beg again, and then something occurred to him. “Is there something else you want? I just want to please you.”

“My beautiful boy,” Hannibal moved closer and ran a hand through Will’s curls. The fondness radiating from him was nearly palpable. *There that’s it.*

“No, nothing else for now. I’m going to untie one of your hands. Do you remember our signal from last time?” Hannibal undid the knot around Will’s wrist. The feeling slowly crept back

into his muscles as he rotated his wrist in small circles before blindly groping on the bed for Hannibal's knee. He smiled as his fingers stroked over heated skin, familiar and comforting.

Will nodded.

"Pinch your thigh as hard as I can if it's too much."

"Very good. Open your mouth."

Will complied.

"Wider." Hannibal placed the pad of his thumb and middle finger in the center of Will's bottom lip to urge him to obey.

"Perfect," Hannibal said adoringly before entering Will's inviting mouth. He only pushed in a couple inches at first, letting him adjust before gradually gliding all the way to the back of Will's throat. Will let out a low noise of relief, head tilting back and throat opening to accept him. Hannibal gripped the hair at the base of Will's neck and rested his other hand just below Will's jaw so he could feel the muscles contracting, feel himself inside Will.

He pulled back slowly, and Will reveled in the sensation of every inch of Hannibal slipping over his tongue. He thrust back in harder, and Will's fingers clawed up Hannibal's thigh. It was as though he had forgotten he could touch him, and when he remembered, his hand caressed every patch of skin within reach: the curve of Hannibal's ass, his tight stomach, the trail of hair running from his navel to his erection. The thrusts were getting faster and deeper, and Will's cheeks flushed as he heard the obscene choking sounds coming from the impact.

Hannibal moaned his name, and Will clutched at his hip, trying to take him impossibly deeper. He pulled out completely and Will gulped lungfuls of air, the beginning of automatic tears forming at the corners of his eyes, clinging to the fabric of the mask.

"Come back," Will gasped, ardent hand squeezing Hannibal's ass, "*please*, Hannibal."

Will caught his mistake, but Hannibal was roughly forcing his cock inside before he could correct it. Will groaned gratefully, that magnificently full feeling erasing all worries from his mind again. It was such an odd comfort to lie back and be tasked with nothing other than simply taking it, granting Hannibal permission to take his fill. He kept to a brutal pace for another minute or so before abruptly stopping, releasing Will's hair and leaving his mouth empty once again.

Will stretched his neck and hummed happily, euphoric and only dimly aware of Hannibal's presence as he shifted to lay on top of him.

"My darling…" Hannibal murmured huskily, lips planting feathery kisses on Will's neck and ear. "You were remarkable today. Sublime in every way."

"Really?" Will mumbled dreamily.

"Yes. Indisputably."

Will heard the swish of fabric and suddenly his other hand was free. Hannibal's warm weight disappeared as he maneuvered Will's ankles free as well. Comforting hands massaged his ankles to awaken the blood vessels and chase out the numbness. The vague notion that it might be acceptable for him to remove the blindfold now flashed across Will's mind, but in the end, he decided he preferred to let Hannibal do it. It didn't feel right to take it off himself.

The mattress sank softly as Hannibal laid against Will's side, sliding the mask from the younger man's eyes and depositing it on the pillow behind him. Will blinked rapidly, the diffused light of the bedside lamp dilating his pupils and awakening his senses. He had the distinct impression of waking from a dream, that gradual fade from sleep into reality.

"Hi." Will greeted him with a shy smile, relishing the sight of Hannibal's face, the sparkling maroon tinted eyes and the sharp cheekbones.

"Hello," Hannibal smiled back sweetly and kissed him. "How would you like to proceed?"

"My choice now?" Will quirked a skeptical eyebrow.

"Yes, I'd say you have more than earned it today." Hannibal scraped his teeth down the side of Will's neck.

"Mmm I want you inside me. In your lap. Close," Will whispered, tongue parting Hannibal's lips in an insistent kiss.

In one fluid motion, Hannibal sat up with his back against the headboard and hauled Will into his lap. He kissed his shoulder as he bent to the side, fumbling with the nightstand drawer. Will instinctively leaned forward to give him a better angle, resting his chin on Hannibal's shoulder. Two slicked fingers entered him, and Will moaned, tightly wrapping his arms around Hannibal's back. He melted into Hannibal's lap, the onset of so much contact nearly unmooring him. Part of Will still felt shy about receiving without asking, unsure what the rules of the game were or if the game was even still happening. The pads of Hannibal's fingers rubbed against his prostate, and Will squeezed him even tighter, panting into his ear.

"What are you waiting for?" Will demanded, sucking on the older man's earlobe and adamantly rocking back onto his fingers.

"I'm inside you. You are in my lap. Is there a problem?" Hannibal sounded maddeningly nonchalant.

"You bastard," Will laughed. "I thought it was my choice now?"

"That does not mean I don't want you to beg," Hannibal grasped Will's jaw and turned his head until they were eye to eye. Hannibal's eyes narrowed, dangerous and lustful and everything Will ever wanted.

"Fuck me, Hannibal. *Please please*," Will's hips kept resolutely thrusting back to meet Hannibal's fingers, his eyes imploring and subservient. "I need you. I need you so much."

Hannibal's pupils blew wide and his neck reddened. Will nearly bit his own tongue trying to suppress the triumphant smile building in response. He didn't think the novelty of seeing Hannibal so overcome from a well-placed "please" would ever wear off.

Hannibal gave him what we wanted but still on his own terms. After he pushed in just past the head, he stalled. Will groaned impatiently, fingers digging into Hannibal's shoulders in an effort to resist pushing back onto his thick cock. Will whimpered and looked into Hannibal's eyes, another plea poised to leave his mouth. Hannibal smirked and buried himself in Will's tight heat in one hard thrust. They both let out content moans as Will bucked down to meet Hannibal's seamless thrusts. They settled easily into a shared rhythm, the two men so familiar with each other's bodies by now.

"Talk to me. Please." Will nestled his chin back into the crook of Hannibal's neck, hips undulating in his lap.

"You were extraordinarily beautiful tonight. Pale, slim, scarred body stretched out to its full length like da Vinci's Vitruvian man, an ideal to be held in esteem. Your scars don't disfigure; they distinguish." Hannibal thrust into him, possessive hands gripping his hips. "You wear pain like another might wear precious jewels, adornments on a masterpiece. It only enhances your every exemplary feature."

Will blushed deeply. He hadn't expected to be *worshiped* so soon. Perhaps something about his obedience, about how Hannibal derived such a sense of accomplishment from breaking down someone as stubborn and rebellious as Will, about how he intended to go further next time, but not this tenderness. Unexpected though it was, he reveled in it.

One of Hannibal's hands curled around Will's throat, and he responded by stretching his neck back to expose the skin. Hannibal's grip tightened. At first the pressure felt good, the reduction in oxygen flow hardening his already stiff cock, but something went wrong, a sour taste flooding his mouth as images shot across his mind in angry, frenetic snapshots. Will choked out a panicked noise and still Hannibal's fingers held fast. The seizure inducing flashing lights, the metronome, that wide tube distending his esophagus. Was Hannibal restricting his airway even more now or was it just his imagination? Sweat beaded on his forehead and rolled down his cheeks in rivulets.

He heard the sound of his own sputtering, erratic breath as though he had projected out of his own body, experiencing half-phantom, incapacitating sensations akin to sleep paralysis. Will coughed, expelling imaginary obstructions from his lungs that seemed to turn tangible as he slipped back into his Wolf Trap kitchen, Abigail's ear tumbling out of his throat and into the basin of the sink with a sickeningly wet smack. The texture of cold steel under sweaty palms, the winter air rushing past clammy skin in that drafty old house.

"Stop…w-wendigo!" Will stuttered. Hannibal's hand dropped from Will's throat as quickly as someone burned from an unexpectedly hot stove. Will disentangled himself from his grasp, ignoring the keen pain of Hannibal's cock withdrawing without care. A hand landed on his shoulder, and he roughly shook it off without even deciding to. The frames kept clicking by in an anxious rollercoaster-esque blur so sickeningly fast that his stomach lurched and roiled. He swallowed great mouthfuls of air, counting as he went, trying to ground and settle. Gradually, the images slowed and faded, dissolving like drifting clouds. He came to and

realized he had crawled to the top right corner of the bed, hunched over with arms extended outward to keep the demons of his nightmares at bay, sweating and shaking like a frightened animal burrowing to safety. It seemed like it was all over in a lightning flash. He squeezed his eyes shut, breathing in and out for counts of three.

Will wanted to turn around. Wanted to look at Hannibal and assure him it was okay. That he was fine. Wanted to explain what happened, but he felt frozen to the spot like a fly drowning in a vinegar trap.

“Will?” Tentative. So unsure for someone like Hannibal.

“Hannibal, I…” Will took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He tried to wrench his body around, but it wouldn’t cooperate. “What happened back there…it was…”

“I have an idea…” Hannibal whispered. “I apologize. I thought you might enjoy it.”

“I didn’t…” Will cautiously looked over his shoulder, still not fully meeting Hannibal’s eyes but enough to see him in his periphery. The tempo of his breath slowed, approaching regularity as he regained control of his body and mind. “I didn’t *really* think you would hurt me, but I saw…”

“What did you see?” Hannibal moved close but didn’t touch, voice quiet and patient.

“You putting that tube down my throat…me coughing up Abigail’s ear,” Will said softly, sadly. “I guess if I were anyone else, you would tell me to seek therapy, right?”

“Perhaps…depending on the situation and the person. But that’s not really an option for you. Not in the traditional sense anyway.” Hannibal lightly rested his hand on Will’s shoulder, waiting for permission to continue.

“No…you made damn sure of that, didn’t you?” His voice drifted back into his own ears, and try as he might, he couldn’t quell the bite to them. It was like watching someone else, powerless to stop it.

Hannibal didn’t bristle from the pointed barb. In fact, he ignored it completely.

“Did you seek out conventional therapy in my absence?”

Your absence. Like you were on sabbatical. Like we didn’t both endure the most fucked up chain of events that left you in prison and me with whole constellations of new scars inside and out.

Will finally turned onto his back, head tilting to look at Hannibal full on.

“Yes, I did…It seemed idiotic to not at least try. It was about as helpful as you’d expect. I learned my own successful coping mechanisms along the way. They worked until they didn’t. I found new ones. Life became manageable again.” Will shook his head. “It’s bizarre. I would have expected a flare-up early on but not now. I’ve been so at peace with you. I haven’t been plagued by the usual nightmares. I…I’ve felt better than ever honestly. I don’t understand

why *now*. I guess acceptance doesn't equal eradication, but I don't know what made that happen especially considering certain…preferences we've discovered I have."

"I think I simply pushed you too far. This was a long day. It was quite ample for your first foray into submission, and I apologize for extending it beyond your fortitude." Hannibal stroked Will's hair and looked unsettlingly calm.

"Except that you *wanted* to see how far I could go. The 'lure of witnessing how beautifully I break.' You like my fear. It fascinates you." Will narrowed his eyes and shrank away from Hannibal's hand.

Hannibal looked wounded, and Will wasn't sure what to do with that.

"I like harnessing it in a way that will lead you to conquer it and burn it as fuel for your radiance. You are more powerful than every being on this Earth, Will, but when you are fearless…that is when you are truly inexorable. I do not *want* you to be afraid of me or of anything else in this world. I thought this would be therapeutic for you, and I believe it was until that moment. I had also thought a sharing of roles might minimize – "

"Stop." Will held up his hand. The anger came back, and this time he wasn't watching from afar wishing he could stop the words from spilling. "Have you been doing this because you thought it would make me more…pliable? Submitting to me sometimes to gain my trust and the upper hand when you *need it*? So I'll submit to you?!"

Will heard the volume of his voice climbing but did nothing to stifle it.

"That's a rather reductive reading of the situation – "

"So you are still manipulating!" Will interrupted. "It's just a different kind this time. Disguised as kindness and tending to my needs."

"Not disguised, Will. Our needs are far from being mutually exclusive. In fact, there is a considerably large area of overlap." Hannibal was so unflustered, and all Will wanted to do was slap a reaction out of him. "If you would – "

"I can't believe this. You and your doubletalk. Why can't it just be 'I thought you might like this because it feels good'? Why does it have to be filtered through mystifying webs of shit?" Will took a breath and cringed at his manic speech. He knew he was overreacting, and that what he was really upset about had nothing to do with Hannibal's motivations in the bedroom.

"Because nothing is as simple as – " Hannibal experienced a rare moment of second guessing and changed course, "Will, all actions are governed by a motivation of some sort. All romantic relationships must contain a desire to keep the other happy in order to work for any significant stretch of time. Why should you scold me for wanting you to be happy? For *learning* more about what makes you happy? Do not confuse my projections regarding your needs with a desire to scheme a means to an end for my own. This…experiment was not about being selfish. If you never want to do anything like it again, I will not be disappointed. The choice is entirely yours."

Hannibal smiled and attempted to embrace him. Will allowed it, but he remained stiff and unyielding in his arms.

“I wish you weren’t so fucking polite right now…” Will muttered petulantly, eyes downcast.

“Is that what you want, Will? A predictable return to form that you can rebel against, making it easier for you to reject this and have a convenient excuse for why it didn’t work?” Hannibal was stern but kind. He turned Will’s face toward him, eyes passionate and determined. “I won’t give it to you. We have come too far. We have both changed too much, and we both deserve a proper chance at happiness.”

“Do you ever wonder what would have happened if you’d been like this earlier? If you’d touched me? Sometimes I think about whether or not I would have rejected the real you if we’d been lovers first…if that attachment would have made it harder not to leave with you, chemical signals in my brain halting all reason.” Will squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the telltale sting of hot tears gathering at the corners. “Or even later…after Muskrat Farm, what if instead of sitting politely at the foot of the bed watching over me, you had gotten in bed *with* me? Held me and stroked my hair until I finally succumbed to exhaustion? You only touched me when you *hurt me*.”

The tears were falling like rain now, and he didn’t move to wipe them away. He kept his now blurry eyes on Hannibal, who no longer appeared calm but rather looked just as pained as Will wanted him to.

“Sometimes I think I got close enough for you to hurt me again and again…” *Just so I could feel you close, just so I could feel your warmth, your love. Your love always felt the same as a blade to me anyway.* The thought was too twisted and vulnerable for him to share, but he could see in Hannibal’s moist eyes that he knew.

“You do not have to be in pain for me to touch you now, darling Will,” Hannibal’s tone was hushed and broken by his hitching breath. “The only pain I will deliver at my hands is at your discretion. You decide when it happens, when it stops. It is just a game. It’s not – ”

“We’re always playing games,” Will choked out, the fog of emotion so opaque he couldn’t see through it to find logic. His crying had ceased and been replaced by an eerie dispassion.

Hannibal sighed poignantly and pulled Will closer, cheek resting against his hair.

“It isn’t like that anymore. I know you know this. Both of us are privy to any game we play together from now on, and it *is* together. With each other, not against. There are no upper hands, but I must reiterate that we needn’t ever do this again if you feel it does not suit your tastes.”

Will wanted to stubbornly buck against Hannibal’s arms, but he melted into him, aching for his touch no matter how confused and disturbed he was right now.

“I asked for this…I encouraged you to stop holding back.” Will let out a heavy sigh and allowed his head to fall on Hannibal’s shoulder, the fingers of a cautious hand walking their way to Hannibal’s stomach.

“Is that what this is about? You will never stop mentally flogging yourself, will you? You requested that, yes, but I was the one to suggest this implementation of it. We were following the cues of one another, testing the waters.” Hannibal sounded tired, and it made Will feel even worse.

“No, I can’t stop…it’s just how I am. You know that.” Will turned his face to Hannibal’s skin, burying his nose in the Earthy scent of him. It marginally eased his disquiet.

“I would repeat once again that this will not all be resolved at once, but I fear the words would go unheeded.” Amusement crept back into Hannibal’s voice finally. Will gained the courage to lift his head and kiss his lover’s cheek.

“I’m trying…but sometimes it’s a little bewildering to reconcile the you then with the you now…and it’s even more mental gymnastics to reconcile my two selves. When the two overlap as they did just now, I feel…like an atom splitting. Or like looking in the mirror and seeing my reflection behave differently. Frowning while I’m smiling at it. I don’t…” Will paused and gathered the words at the base of his tongue. This wasn’t going to be a fun conversation, but one could argue it already went past that point minutes ago. He barreled ahead. “I don’t want you to be perfect and attentive and accommodating and trying so sincerely to please me and *succeeding* in being good for me, good for *us*…only for me to still see the man who cut the throat of my surrogate daughter in front of me and left us both to bleed out every time we have a bad day or a particularly brutal argument.”

Hannibal looked completely crestfallen, Will’s confession tipping him over the edge. Every facial muscle slackened, the corners of his mouth downturned, the sharp slope of his fine cheekbones seeming to flatten. The lines on his face deepened with concern, the spark gone from his eyes and replaced with stark, empty black.

“I believe it goes without saying that I do not want that to be the case either,” Hannibal swallowed, a hard, hoarse sound that stretched in the awkward silence and made Will’s brows pinch together, “It seems the air hangs heavy to the point of oppression, does it not? Under normal circumstances, we might blame the humidity…”

Hannibal let his arms loosen around Will until they fell away completely.

“I’m sorry…not being able to let go and put the past away for good is my biggest fear, and I…I thought I should vocalize it before the moment passed. I’m not always the best with this. I go inward. You know that better than anyone. I thought it would less scary if I said it out loud and dealt with it. If *we* dealt with it.” Will’s breath quickened, eyes darting over Hannibal’s face anxiously.

“All because I kept pushing your boundaries until you told me definitively to cease…all because of that, we went from carnal to painfully solemn in an instant.” Hannibal leaned against the headboard, glassy eyes facing forward now, and laughed. A short, mirthless sound. “I suppose that is the theme of this conversation and by your assessment, our whole lives together, isn’t it? What if I had. Just. Stopped.”

Will gulped, afraid anything he said would make everything spiral even further.

“I guess the evening is beyond salvaging at this point…” Will trailed off before adding a muted, “Sorry.”

Suddenly, Hannibal rose from the bed and began to get dressed.

“You should eat. You have been in here for quite a few hours. We both have; it must be after ten by now.” Hannibal busied himself with buttons, cuffs, and collars, anything to keep his eyes locked on something other than Will. “It is imperative to keep your body supplied with proper fuel. Although you are mostly recovered, you are still on the mend and haven’t had adequate sustenance today for which I am to blame.”

“Hannibal – ”

“Don’t,” Hannibal said, uncharacteristically curt, head snapping up to fix Will with nearly predatory eyes. He collected himself immediately and let a more neutral expression fall over his features like a shroud before continuing. “What you said will echo in the chambers of my brain for a long time without the need for further elaboration. I promise you that. I heard you, Will. Loud and clear as they say.”

Will gaped, astonished at how quickly everything had slipped out of his grasp today. Wisely, he chose to remain silent. It wouldn’t do either of them any favors to force the issue. Hannibal bent down to pick up Will’s clothes and handed them to him in a bundle.

“Get dressed and come downstairs. I will make us a late dinner.”

“I don’t think I can summon an appetite, Hannibal.”

“Very well.” There was a peevish note to his reply that didn’t go unnoticed by Will. “I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.”

Normally that would have been a comforting statement, a description that characterized Hannibal as the loving partner, but it only sounded hollow and obligatory now. Hannibal left the room, and the heavy moisture of the tropical air suddenly felt like the pinpricks of freezing rain on Will’s skin. He huddled in the sheets and tried to pretend that sleep would come.

Chapter End Notes

So begins the promised return to conflict for our boys. It can't be helped of course. They will never be without their problems (much like any couple but also really, really not haha). I hope nothing about the way I did this was offensive, but I've always thought Will's desire for this dynamic between the two of them wouldn't go off without a hitch.

While I agree with Hannibal that there is a therapeutic element to it, I think there's also a risk involved and the balance could tip at any time. Hope you enjoyed it and are steeped in anticipation for what is to come!

A big heaping thanks to @castellomargot for continuing to help guide me and be my beta as I take on more challenging obstacles with this fic!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> I have returned! Terribly sorry that it's been so long, but I hope you'll rejoin me once again! As always, comments and kudos give me life. I love hearing from all of you. :)
>
> Thank you to my buddy @castellomargot for beta-ing and reassuring me as I navigate the angst! She also made a lovely header image for the fic which I'm pasting below.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Insomnia was an unfortunate affliction with which Will was well acquainted, its presence almost ubiquitous in his life for as long as he could remember. After hours of tossing and turning to no avail, anxieties refused to evaporate and solutions refused to hush the braying cries of the insidious chorus inside Will's head. To add insult to injury, the chaotic internal storm raged long enough to override his physical body's exhaustion, prohibiting him from sleeping through the cause of his restlessness returning to bed.

Weak-willed and bleary-eyed, Will reached out to Hannibal, fingers searching for anchor in his downy chest hair. Hannibal let him, covering his forearm with a warm hand.

"Hannibal, I…" Will murmured, but fingers pressed to his sleep-dry lips.

"Do not force discourse at such an hour, Will. I understand the impulse to rush to resolution because you feel unsettled, but emotions run high when one is fatigued. And you have no doubt been severely lambasting yourself here alone in the dark. Sleep. We'll talk when we both have a clear head." Hannibal stroked Will's arm and was quiet for so long that Will was startled to feel the reverberations of his chest when he added, "I love you. One argument, no matter how charged the context, will not change that. Not when we have both been the perpetrators of actions so much worse than harmful words."

He brought Will's knuckles to his lips for a soft kiss, and Will wondered if Hannibal had only said it as collateral, a promise of future reconciliation just to quiet his brain in hopes of cajoling him into sleep. In the end, he decided he didn't really care if it was.

"I love you too, mylimasis," Will whispered as he nestled his head onto Hannibal's chest, devouring the pleased hum he felt vibrating from Hannibal's body into his own and letting it dissolve on his tongue like a sleeping pill.

Will wasn't sure if Hannibal's lack of initiative was due to compassion or cowardice. On one hand, he had been very clear about his desire to always let Will take his time since the beginning of their new life together, and he had been true to his word on this. On the other hand, something about the way his fingers flexed around every object he gripped (the curve of the bannister, the handle of the trowel), veins jutting out prominently as his muscles twitched ever so slightly, the corners of his mouth drawn tight, made Will speculate that his reluctance stemmed from still feeling wounded by his words.

Will had woken earlier to find he was alone. While not unusual, it felt suspect today, especially after he went downstairs to find a plate of food in the kitchen with a note next to it in Hannibal's ornamental script. Making his way to the sunroom, he peered around the edge of the windows to find that Hannibal was exactly where the note said he would be. He watched him weeding a flowerbed, sleeves rolled up to reveal sinewy forearms as he crouched in the grass, perspiration dotting his olive skin. Hannibal had been browning like a Mediterranean farmer since they arrived in the Ivory Coast. By contrast, Will's pallor was

slow to disappear, his alabaster complexion much more prone to burning than tanning. When Hannibal failed to turn around to notice him after a few moments, Will walked away and headed back to the kitchen.

His breakfast (ful medames, an Egyptian dish of fava beans, boiled eggs, garlic, onions, and spices that Will found to be a little much first thing in the morning) was lukewarm as he ate, but he didn't bother to heat it in the oven or use the built-in microwave. The first time Will had attempted to use the latter, Hannibal had all but forbade it with a steely look that was sharp as an icepick.

It was after noon when Hannibal finally came back inside, and Will had settled onto the living room couch with Winston beside him. Will heard the back door shut and tried not to mirror the way Winston perked up expectantly at the sound. He placed the book he was reading on the arm of the couch and scratched the dog's neck as he leaned back in an attempt to appear casual. It was hard to do considering his heart pounded with every step Hannibal took toward the living room. When their eyes met, Hannibal's expression was inscrutable. Will wasn't sure if he should be relieved to find no animosity there or worried that his face was so blank.

"Good morning, Will. Did you eventually get some sleep?"

"Morning is over actually. But yeah, I did…I'm not ready to take a three hour long standardized test or solve any complex calculus problems, but I'm functional." Will smiled weakly and continued to pet Winston's fur like a comfort blanket.

Hannibal nodded solemnly and turned to ascend the stairs. He walked partway up before looking over his shoulder.

"I'll be back down after I shower."

When he was out of sight, Will exhaled heavily and resumed reading. Every sentence ran together. After rereading the same paragraph five times, he gave up and waited for the sound of the old wooden stairs creaking under Hannibal's feet.

It only took a few minutes, and Winston jumped down and ran to the base of the staircase as he heard him approaching. Hannibal bent down to comb his fingers through soft fur, and Will scowled at the pup. *Traitor*. He shook away the irrational thought with a small laugh, and Hannibal walked over to sit down next to him, wet hair sticking to the backs of his ears. Will couldn't resist carding his fingers through it, pleased to see that Hannibal leaned into it and closed his eyes rather than resisting.

"So…" Will breathed.

"So," Hannibal responded flatly.

"I thought maybe you were going to avoid me all day." Will's eyes concentrated on Hannibal's, searching for any sign of what the other man was thinking.

“I had no intention of that. I merely wanted to be ready for this conversation and assumed you would be sleeping late.” Hannibal moved closer but his posture remained stiff, formal.

“That checks out, I guess,” Will said with a playful smile. The smile faded as quickly as it had appeared, and they fell into a prickly silence that expanded like a tenacious plague. The longer it went on, the more insurmountable breaking it seemed.

“I can't read your mind, Will,” Hannibal eventually professed, fatigue tinging his foreign drawl.

“Can’t you?” Will meant it as a joke, but the words imbued the air with an unintentional heaviness.

“No…” Hannibal whispered. “I never could. Not for lack of trying, mind you.”

“It feels like the honeymoon’s over,” Will mumbled darkly, suddenly very interested in some faint, ancient scuff mark on the oak floor.

“In order for there to be a honeymoon, a couple must have illusions about each other that are lying in wait to be dispelled. It implies an ignorance of the true character of one’s partner: the darkest, innermost places we seek to conceal for fear that those portions will make us unlovable if they are discovered. We are in the unique position of beginning a relationship without any illusions; we were absolved of those long ago.” Even without looking, Will could feel his eyes boring into him.

“Unique position indeed…This is the first time we’ve fought though. Since the cliff.” Will dared to meet his eyes now, fighting the impulse to look anywhere else. “I didn’t want you to think that me having…an *episode* like that invalidates anything I’ve said or done up to this point. You know I love you, don’t you?”

“I don't doubt that, but I do doubt that you *want* to.” Hannibal crossed his legs and leaned back, an elegant hand resting on his thigh. “I took the relatively smooth transition we have had for granted. It was difficult to hear a visceral admission after so much peace. I had forgotten how terrifying it is to love someone so completely. Not since..."

“Mischa,” Will finished for him gently. He knew it took courage for Hannibal to admit something so vulnerable, and his heart would have sung at the sound of those words if it hadn’t been under such dour circumstances. “Hannibal, I don’t know what to say…I know I spent a long time denying it, but that was then and this is now. You know you’ve been the dividing line for my past and future. I *want* this no matter how hard it gets. I don’t…I don’t really have a choice.”

Hannibal opened his mouth to interrupt, and Will held up a hand to signal that he needed to finish.

“Please don’t lecture me on the semantics of what it means to choose. It doesn’t feel like a choice to me because you *are* all the options. There isn’t anything else worth considering in my mind. Only you. Conjoined, remember?” Will placed a questioning hand on his thigh, but

Hannibal didn't stir, didn't return the touch. He only regarded it uncertainly with downturned eyes.

"What if I was wrong?"

"Wrong about what, Hannibal?" Will hesitantly asked.

"What if for all my judicious prodding, you are really a monster solely of my making? What if instead of drawing the beast out with blood soaked bait, I was planting it? What if I was mistaken about what I saw inside you?" Hannibal slowly canted his head toward Will, gaze so cold and distant that it sent chilling frissons up and down his spine.

"How can you even say that?!" Will felt like he'd been punched in the stomach, every wisp of air leaving his lungs. "Hannibal, there was something dark and charred within me my whole life. I came out abnormal in the mold, just anomalous enough that people could smell it but normal enough that no one could place a name to the scent. But *you* could. You did."

"I believed I did, yes. But if you are still residing in a frame of mind wherein you feel that my past transgressions surpass your own in severity, then you must feel superior. If you feel superior, you must still think I am a monster, a creature who is so diametrically opposed to what is good and right as to be pitied for how misguided he has been in his attempts to express love. And if you feel this way, it is only natural for me to question how you could possibly view me as worthy of your love and forgiveness." Hannibal's amber eyes grew stormy and menacing, and Will's heart pounded fearfully in his chest.

"I love you more than anything in this life, Hannibal. A realization I didn't come to lightly, but it was worth every arduous step in this journey. I'm sorry about what I said. I thought you would want me to be honest in the moment. I didn't think you would – " Will was tripping over his words as he tried to rapidly push them from his throat, close to stammering and trying desperately to avoid it. He knew Hannibal would latch onto any sign of weakness like a wolf closing its jaws around a rabbit's neck.

"And what is love, Will? How can I be certain that what you feel is in line with my own emotions? It is neither measurable nor subjective. It is an abstract concept whose meaning varies from person to person. 'Now he discovered that secret from which one never quite recovers, that even in the most perfect love one person loves less profoundly than the other. There may be two equally good, equally gifted, equally beautiful, but there may never be two that love one another equally well.'**"

"Stop…why are you being like this?!" Will gasped, voice catching on the lump forming in his throat. More angry than sad. "How did I *forget* you could be like this?"

"Like what? How I used to be? Perhaps that is how I *am*, Will. Maybe the rest has been a lie, a role I thought I would settle into and now I see that I was wrong. Perhaps I wanted you to forget and so you did."

"Don't say that."

“Why? Isn’t that your fear? Isn’t that what you wondered when the terror gripped you last night, jostling you from serenity into a perspiring hell before you came back to yourself? But maybe you should be asking why *I* was not the one conveying that same fear? You’re a *very* good fisherman, Will. Remember?” Hannibal leaned in close, breath ghosting across Will’s cheek, and he had the same wild, betrayed look in his eyes that he had all those years ago when he dragged the blade through Will’s stomach. “You cast yourself into the shape I wanted, and you did it so *expertly* that you almost got away with it.”

“But it wasn’t a lie. You know that. I *became* the lie. I-I…you *know* not leaving with you is the biggest regret I have. Hannibal, *please*,” Will tightened his grip on Hannibal’s thigh, eyes searching his for some semblance of belief in what Will was assuring.

“I do know that, Will. That is the epicenter of my point. I have not questioned you. I have not expressed doubt regarding your motives or your love like you did last night. Despite everything, I do not replay an endless loop of trespasses against me by your hands. You queried what would have happened if I had held you? I carried you in my arms in the snow, braced your neck in my hands like an infant, changed your clothes, cleaned your wounds, lay you in the comfort of your own bed. Is that not affection? Because I didn’t lay my hands on you in a more familiar way, it does not count?” The ferocity in Hannibal’s eyes cooled, despondency flitting across the moist irises now.

“Arguably, what I did was more altruistic. Touching you in those days would have been more for my gain than a symbiotic benefit. You didn’t desire my hands on you like that or at the very least you were not in tune with those needs enough to be comfortable with the idea. I know you think of my preparation of you as being borne of selfish whims, but incremental exposure to new ideas was essential to gaining your acceptance. I always cared for you. I always, always *loved* you, but right now I need to be sure that you understand that. Not just in the context of quiet domesticity and insatiable sex because that is not *all* our lives will be. I am not a domesticated canine you can play house with. I am jagged angles and hooked nails peeking between the floorboards to snag on your bare feet at night. You said you wanted it all. Bones and dirt and blood included. You need to remember that right now, and you need to *mean* it.” He leaned in closer, somehow projecting the illusion of towering over Will even though they were still seated. He had a way of doing that despite only having a couple inches of height over the younger man.

Hannibal’s lips quivered minutely, chest heaving with the force of his harsh words. For once his philosophizing didn’t feel like circumvention, no hollow justification designed to obscure true intent behind morally ambiguous pontificating to rotate the perception axis in his favor. It only felt right, and Will felt sorry. But contrite or not, the situation didn’t feel black and white. There was room for both of them to be right.

“That’s actually a very cogent point, but I still maintain that I could have been receptive. You can’t know unless you try…I understand you more than I did then. I still believe that yes, some of your choices were about *your* needs and you believed yourself to be the only one capable of accurately judging right and wrong. You thought you knew what was best for me over everyone else, myself included…*but*” Will turned to squarely meet his intimidating gaze. “You were right. There was overlap. So much undeniable overlap that has only grown larger. You were *right*, but you also don’t get to tell me how to *feel* about what happened to

me. I didn't choose to have that flashback. I was enjoying your hands on me, and then it popped up to ruin everything unannounced. Regardless of your intentions or whether or not the end result justifies it, you need to acknowledge that there were consequences. Unintended? Maybe. But still very real and very lasting and hard to forget. I accept that I too did things that were on the same level, but don't act like it's so wildly inappropriate for me to react the way I did."

"I do not blame you for being triggered, Will. But I object to what was said afterward, particularly your relentless insinuations about why I had suggested the dominance and submission dynamic. I did my best to help you through it, reassured you multiple times that I had no intention of continuing if it was doing you unnecessary harm, but you rejected my care and turned it against me. The act of punishing for the past in a perpetual way could be a problem if either of us are to resort to it as a defense mechanism every time we argue." Hannibal sighed, exhaling heavily like this exchange was draining the very life from him.

Will ran his hands down his face, fingertips digging into the depressions beneath his eyes, raking down the soft flesh of his scarred cheek. He wondered if his face looked as old as he felt in that moment. He pictured himself as a wizened old man, wrinkles on his face widening into craggy fault lines, hunched posture worsening until he was doubled over, elbows merging with knees to develop into permanent fusion. *What would we look like if we wore all of our trauma on the outside? I only have a few marring my skin, and I hide them easily.*

"Where do we go from here?" Will's tone was broken, fragmented with dejection and pessimism. He could hear the hissing tongues of anxiety and melancholy closing in like contracting walls of a room, feeding off his insecurity and the acrimony emanating from Hannibal, seeping in to infect his brain and convince him that everything was wrong, wrong, wrong and would never be righted again.

"I don't think either of us feel like going another round nor do I think it would be productive right now. Perhaps it is best if we take leave of one another for today. You have not even fished once since we arrived. We have been preoccupied with each other's company, absorbed in each other in a way that is to be expected but perhaps would not be helpful now." Hannibal's jaw tensed, and his eyes were mournful. Will didn't think this was what he really wanted, maybe was even what he *feared.* But that out of that fear, Hannibal had suggested it as a way of putting off what he thought was inevitable if they didn't drain the atmosphere of its poison.

"What will you do?" Will inquired quietly, soft blue eyes meeting Hannibal's troubled gaze.

"I'm sure I'll find something to do. I have many interests beyond…" Hannibal didn't finish the sentence, but the unsaid word floated in the air. *You*.

No, don't tell me to go away. Not after everything. I don't want to spend another second apart, and neither do you. I'd rather spend the rest of my life carving each other into macabre human jack-o-lanterns than leave. Hurting in your presence is so much better than hurting alone.

Will clamped his lips together to swallow the thoughts, afraid of making everything worse by begging Hannibal to let him stay like a pathetic, needy teenager in love for the first time. But

as Will felt the telltale constriction of his chest and the welling of his eyes, he lost all control.

“No.” Will shook his head vigorously, hands reaching up to hold either side of Hannibal’s face. His grip was almost cruel, less for the sake of tenderness and more for the sake of demanding. *I won’t let you do this.* “No, no, no. I’m not leaving and neither are you.”

“Will – ” Hannibal dipped his chin down to avoid Will’s gaze, and Will jerked it back up again.

“I would rather suffer *with* you then be without you for another second. Don’t do this. If we have to sit in silence and stew in our own fucked up shit at opposite corners of the room, fine. But we’ve had enough time apart. I need to know where you are. I can’t…”

“Will, listen to me – ”

“NO.”

“WILL.” Hannibal pried Will’s hands from his cheeks, squeezing them between his palms. “While we are still fighting the hold of the past, I find it would be beneficial to avoid adding any more offences to the list. We’ll meet for a late dinner, alright? But please…allow us both this time to breathe before anything escalates to the point of saying more things we cannot take back. You require time to process. You always have. Stubborn as you are, you know this to be true. Besides, modern technology has made it impossible to be truly apart anyhow. You can reach me if you need to. Lingering here to fret and then inevitably incite all over again would not be the healthiest choice.”

“We’ve never been very healthy to begin with…” Will muttered, sinking back into the couch cushions.

“We were starting to be…our own version of it anyhow,” Hannibal replied quietly, and the words scorched Will like hot coals beneath the soles of his feet. Was Hannibal the most rational person in the room right now? Surely that couldn’t be the case. And then it hit him. Having that thought *was* a problem. It *did* smack of arrogance, and who was he to still think he was more of a human being than Hannibal? What about Will was more redeeming to society’s standards at this point? A lesser body count? If he was going to truly join Hannibal in the life they had intended, he couldn’t hold onto an air of superiority anymore. *Every man to die by your hands so far can be claimed as a necessity.*

“I hate when you’re right,” Will slumped further into the cushy furniture, unable to muster the energy to move. He hoped the couch would grow jaws and swallow him, secreting him away to some dark, starry, tranquil place where he could languish in dewy grass not yet frosted with fall. The tropics were getting to him, outlining his agitation with humid heat hazes hovering off the ground. Something about the desolation of winter agreed with Will, the hush falling over nature sedating him and organizing his vibrant mind. When he felt overstimulated and sullen, he longed for its frozen embrace. Where would they go next? He hoped it was somewhere with more distinct seasons. Not waiting for a response, Will finally got up, sulky head filled with fog, and climbed the stairs in search of his fishing gear.

Will sat in the rented speedboat and listened to the vacillating ripples in Lac Bakré, the way they picked up from the coastal winds to mimic the rollicking swell of the ocean and then died down to subtle waves, hindered by their borders, unable to be as wild and unpredictable as the sea. He had parked the boat near the middle of the lake as it was likely to be the deepest spot in the water, making it the most promising for actually catching anything. The lake was mostly empty this far in. Most people preferred to linger closer to the edge, groups of swimmers and picnickers peppering the left bank. A more daring young man ventured toward the center, swimming about thirty feet or so from Will. The blistering heat penetrated Will's skin until he felt like a seared roast. At least it seemed to have the welcome side effect of fatiguing him enough to slow his thoughts. It was hard to be livid when just *existing*, inert and half-reclining, resulted in sweating through his t-shirt.

Just as he contemplated removing his shirt and dunking into the water for relief, Will heard frantic splashing and coughing coming from the direction where the young man had been swimming nearby. Will turned toward him but halted any other action. *What would Hannibal do?* As the thought took hold, Will slipped into his partner's mindset like a tailored suit, the pendulum swinging him into a new perspective like a sliding door. The corners of his mouth tugged into a subtle, curious smile, a smile he could not claim as his own. *When the fox hears the rabbit scream, he comes running. But not to help*. Time slowed down, the seconds lagging like limbs trying to extricate themselves from quicksand as Will weighed out the options the way he imagined Hannibal would. He pictured every outcome and its consequence in detail, possible trajectories branching out before him like lines on the horizon only visible to himself.

"Au secours!*" An anguished cry for help, and Will was back in real time. His eyes darted around rapidly to observe the area. The water was too muddy for him to see down more than a foot or so from this distance, but from the way the man was struggling, pulling in one direction to no avail, Will had an idea of the cause. Hastily grabbing the knife he brought to gut his catches, he dove in and swam over. When he was only a few short feet away, he plunged underneath. The rays of the sun infused the lake with a murky illumination, and Will glanced around for a few tense seconds before locating the coiled seaweed around the man's ankle, its constrictive hold grown all the more tangled from his thrashing and twisting. He unfolded the blade and cut the stranger's leg free, marveling at how such a weak plant could turn lethal when all it took to dislodge it was one careful swipe of the knife. Will swam to the surface, gasping for air as he bobbed on the top of the lake.

"Merci, monsieur. Je vous suis extrêmement reconnaissant."

"Je vous en prie. C'est rien," Will panted out.

He nodded jerkily with a shy smile and hurriedly swam back to the boat without waiting for a response. He hoisted himself up and over the edge, panting as the brutal sunbeams immediately began to wick away the moisture from his soaked clothes and skin. The man was rejoining a female companion who was shouting fervidly from the sandy bank, clutching the man to her chest as she spoke a mile a minute. Will assumed she was asking questions

about what had happened, but his command of the French language was still minimal and they were far enough away now that it came back to his ears as garbled nonsense. When he saw the man point to him and then the pair of them wave at him ecstatically, Will felt apprehension grip him at the very core. He switched on the motor to the boat and steered it to the other end, wishing he had just taken his chances in the open ocean. The lake felt very, very small all of a sudden.

When Will bolted in through the front door, curly hair disheveled and matted in spots from the water of the lake, Hannibal was arranging a number of items on the dining table. Will swiveled his head around, scanning the first floor from his position in the foyer to locate any sign of Hannibal. Their eyes met, tentative and almost cursory, through the fan shaped glass inlay that looked into the dining room. Removing his wet shoes in the foyer, he headed through the living room around to the arched entrance of the dining room. Hannibal was standing at the foot of the table furthest away from the entrance. Will walked about halfway down the left side of the table before stopping, resting his elbows on the back of a chair.

"Sorry, I planned on being gone a little longer, but…something happened…" Will said noncommittally, the line of his vision drawn to the silver objects on the table. "What's all this?"

"Are you alright? What happened?" Hannibal jumped past Will's question as he scrutinized his messy appearance, concern written in the taut lines of his face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I…rescued a drowning man I guess?" Will laughed nervously.

When Hannibal didn't comment and just kept spearing him with those intense, inquisitive eyes, Will continued.

"I put myself in your perspective before I decided what to do." Will made an amused noise and rotated the base of a silver candlestick between his thumb and forefinger. "You operate… in the antithesis of 'innocent until proven guilty.' You require people to exhibit their worth to you. You don't assume their lives have intrinsic value until you are given evidence to corroborate that; for most people, it's the other way around. For *me*, it's mostly the other way around too except that my empathy puts me in the awkward position of learning someone's value long before it's the appropriate time. Their hand is usually revealed before they even know they're holding any cards."

Hannibal smiled faintly and walked a few paces closer.

"And how did it feel? Pretending to be me?"

"Interesting." Will turned to face Hannibal. "To be detached enough to weigh out the options for curiosity's sake…it's not…I'm not *superior* to you because I don't subscribe to it.

Different doesn't equal inferior, and I'm sorry that I had lingering feelings about that. For all of our talks on perspective, I shouldn't have."

"Thank you, Will," Hannibal softly intoned as he pushed a hand through Will's damp curls.

"Did you feel that way about me? When you were making decisions about how to frame me?"

"Yes."

"But you don't now?" Will whispered, covering Hannibal's hand with his own. He knew the answer, but he really needed the reminder.

"No." Hannibal shook his head. "This is difficult for me too. I've never shared space with someone like this so wholly. As much as I have welcomed it with open arms, it is not devoid of necessary adjustments." Though he still appeared fairly stoic and contained, hearing those words from his lips made Hannibal seem almost normal.

"Wow, that…really humanizes you." Will was taken aback but bemoaned his phrasing as soon as Hannibal's eyes flickered with irritation. "No no, I didn't mean it like that. It's just that you can be rather…*ethereal* in your ability to rise above the needs and tendencies the rest of us consider automatic. Which I realize is probably a dangerous statement to relay to someone as egotistical as you…"

Will smiled and nudged Hannibal's shoe with his bare foot.

"But it's true nonetheless."

"Living with me in a day to day fashion hasn't dispelled any of those myths?" Hannibal smirked and arched a humorous brow.

"It has to some extent," Will conceded with a nod. He thought of all the monotonous parts of humanity in which he now had witnessed Hannibal partaking. Brushing his teeth, following a fastidious skincare routine for which Will never failed to tease him, watching him shift and stretch in his slumber.

"I lived many years as I am: solitary, defined, molded and hardened like steel into a shape I believed to be incapable of alteration. And then I met this man…" Hannibal mused, fingers stroking the line of Will's cheekbone.

"Who is he?! I don't recall giving you permission to fraternize with other men," Will joked, flashing him a faux look of disapproval.

Hannibal grinned back but ignored him otherwise. *Have we reached that stage of the relationship already? Are you going to ignore my bad jokes and keep talking like they never happened?*

"And he dismantled my entire worldview and poise by simply existing within my orbit. Acceding to that was not without its difficulty."

“Perspectives change, Doctor,” Will gently chided.

“Yes, well…far easier to preach from the pulpit and bestow judgment and advice onto others than to enact one’s own policy, isn’t it?”

“You did pretty well, I’d say. I was the one who had trouble coming to terms with it,” Will’s voice trailed off. *Still do apparently.*

“I still attempted to bend the course of nature to my own will, relying on methods I had grown accustomed to without realizing that unique circumstances might call for a new approach.” Will looked up, and when they locked eyes, he found no trace of anything disingenuous.

“Hannibal…are you sure you *want* to be this honest right now?” Will’s voice betrayed a barely concealed shock. *You can’t take any of this back.*

“No.” Hannibal huffed a short laugh, and Will chuckled in response.

“You think we were just too exhausted before?”

Hannibal tilted his head with a quizzical frown.

“When we were at the cabin, I mean. We were so mature and rational every time we talked that I think we deserve the highest accolades. Now that we’re all healed with the spring back in our step, are we back to being arbitrary? Or is this just our version of what happens when we’ve been together long enough to settle in? Because I’d like to say I don’t want to fight with you, but that’s not the whole truth.” Will gave Hannibal a smile that was half amused, half rueful. *We’re both so fucked up. Where would we be if we hadn’t found each other?*

“I echo that sentiment. I like you willful and…feisty I believe is how you put it?” Hannibal smiled sincerely and dropped his hand down to the back of Will’s neck. “I would not take that as an adverse mark against our relationship though. As a former practicing psychiatrist, I can say without a doubt that couples who boast about a complete absence of disputes are often either lying or bored to tears in a passionless existence. Our conflicts are somewhat aggrandized due to our atypical dispositions – ”

“Astute observation, Dr. Lecter,” Will interrupted with a wry smile. “I had no idea we were different than other people.”

Hannibal sighed as his lips upturned.

“Would you have it any other way?”

“Blood and dirt and bone. I *did* mean that, Hannibal.” Will gazed at him with soft eyes before gently kissing the corner of his mouth.

“I know. I suppose it was my turn to require validation. Forgive me.” Hannibal’s eyes softened, the brown hues warming up to offset the lively maroon. He kissed him properly, and they both moaned, a reminder that quarreling had interrupted sex last night.

“I think who needed what is debatable at this point. You still haven’t answered my question, by the way. Did you fly to Connecticut and plunder the buffet of an old money widow? A DuPont perhaps?” Will gestured to the silver platter, tea set, and other shiny metal objects laid out with care.

“No, these were all here in the house. A fact you may have already been acquainted with were you inclined to rifle through the kitchen in search of more than a repugnant method of reheating last night’s dinner,” Hannibal reproached in jest and folded his arms across his chest.

“Hey, I thought you *liked* being Lord of the Scullery while I wait to ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ over your culinary masterpieces.” Will leaned in and nibbled on his earlobe.

“I absolutely do.” He gasped as Will’s teeth scraped down his neck. “Would you like me to tell you precisely *why* all the silver is here?”

“No. Changed my mind. It isn’t half as interesting as this.” Will sucked on the base of Hannibal’s neck and drew him closer, pressing their torsos together.

“Indulge me a moment, will you?” Hannibal gently pulled back from his embrace, and Will whimpered petulantly. “Gold is harder to come by, and while we certainly *could* afford to purchase enough of it to satisfy the intended use, it might arouse suspicion and would prolong the process. Silver however…”

Hannibal fingered the vine-like filigree around the ornate handles of the platter.

“Silver is much more common, particularly in a furnished house of this age. I believe I have cobbled together enough resources to create a sufficient liquid volume for the purpose of dealing with Hamish. Silver has the added benefit of having a lower melting point than gold as well. If you approve, of course.” Hannibal looked at Will expectantly, almost proudly.

Will rolled his eyes and sighed.

“You know when you said you had many other interests, I thought you were implying besides *me* not…besides murder.” Will punctuated the last two words with disdain, exasperated that Hannibal would be suggesting this so soon after the past rocky twenty-four hours. He fixed Hannibal with fiery eyes, and Hannibal was visibly disheartened, the spark draining from his pupils.

“I did mean *you* although I don’t know that spending our minimal time apart devising a surprise for you strengthens my point on the matter.” Hannibal shrugged and turned his attention back to the array of silver.

“I’m sorry. It’s…thoughtful.” *Is it though?! Don’t most couples have makeup sex instead of makeup murder? We might become the arbiters of population control if we put that policy into practice.* “I just don’t think I’m ready to consider making concrete homicidal plans while we’re still out of sync. We have more to talk about, and I’m not even ready to do that to be honest. I’m tired, and my head feels like pressure building inside a volcano. I don’t even know if I can go outside and dwell among the living. After I cut that guy free, I hightailed it

out of there like speaking to another human would strike me dead on the spot…fuck, that's not good, is it? It would have attracted less attention if I stayed and talked to him."

Panic seized in Will's chest, throat drying up and compressing. Hannibal soothingly squeezed his bicep.

"It isn't keeping the lowest of profiles, no. It may seem incongruous, but when forced to interact in public, it is best to leave an impression rather than a mysterious, vague shadow behind. Mystery sometimes spurs in people the desire to search. Something to keep in mind." Hannibal stroked up and down Will's arm and offered a conciliatory smile.

"You don't seem particularly bothered…" Will's forehead creased in confusion.

"I doubt anyone went as far as to follow you all the way from the lake, and if they had, it would most likely be for the express purpose of thanking you," Hannibal stated casually. "Worrying will not accomplish anything anyhow."

"I wish I could be like that…you'll have to give me a crash course on how to achieve grace under fire," Will shook his head and then quickly shot his gaze back up to Hannibal. "Wait, how did you know I went to the lake and not the ocean?"

"One could hardly avoid the fetid aroma of the algae and water-logged soil. It does not require an acute sense of smell such as mine for one to detect it and is quite different from the scent of salt water," Hannibal said with a wrinkle of his nose. "And you will. I would be more than happy to assist in that aspect as well."

Will cocked a sardonic eyebrow as if to say *"I'm sorry…have you MET me?"*

"While I recognize the part of your nature that is predisposed to anxiety, the life we are embarking on necessitates a level of subjugation over that. You will grow accustomed to evasion as second nature. You've proven yourself to be exceptionally adaptable, Will. You of all people should never doubt your ability to evolve and change." Hannibal wrapped his hand around the back of Will's neck, massaging some of the tension out.

"See? You *can* read my mind." Will smiled warmly, letting the apprehension of all the unresolved conflict drift away for a moment.

"I can sometimes parse an accurate impression from clues," Hannibal corrected.

"Sometimes they're one and the same." Will shrugged. "Alright, fuck it…I clearly need to rejoin the world before my hermit tendencies reach Emily Dickinson levels and render me incapable of making a trip to the grocery store without breaking into a cold sweat. Let's get out of here. We can get a table at whatever grandiose restaurant you want, and if it happens to be in the vicinity of wherever Hamish is spending his Thursday night…then so be it."

Hannibal swept his eyes over Will's face, head tilted in mock innocence.

"Don't look at me like that, Hannibal. I know you. If you don't know exactly where he's going tonight, you've at least obtained a minimal idea of where to start from whatever

research you've been doing while I was gone." Will narrowed his eyes, scolding good-naturedly.

"I may have a few notions about where the Scotsman likes to spend his inebriated time," Hannibal acknowledged with a wolfish smile.

"Fine, I'll go shower. We're putting our issues on pause for tonight and getting out of this humid, unairconditioned swamp of a house. Might do us some good, honestly. But you're buying me the best bourbon all night, and you're *not* dressing me." Will flashed him a stern look that let Hannibal know this point was non-negotiable. Hannibal's lips turned down slightly, a micro-expression of disappointment. *You probably had my suit already picked out, you finicky bastard.*

"The finest food and libations we can acquire. Anything you want, dear Will." Hannibal drew him closer for a soft kiss.

"You know I relish any opportunity to spoil you," Hannibal whispered huskily into his ear.

Will turned scarlet, the tips of his ears burning with embarrassment that quickly morphed into arousal the way it always did.

"Stop…" Will untangled himself from Hannibal's arms, unwilling to give in to the heat permeating his whole body. Sex seemed like an ill-advised activity right now. Not until they had more thoroughly discussed the way the last time ended. They were both starting to come down from the full-blown spite of earlier, seeing the situation with a clearer, more logical perspective, but they both knew it wasn't over. They couldn't take each other to bed right now without a care in the world, safe and secure in the knowledge that all would be well. Will snapped off the cold tendrils of that understanding worming its way into his brain, broke the spindly fingers at the root before they could take hold, and forged ahead. There was a nagging voice in the back of his head that cautioned against this plan, but Will had enough of stewing in his own thoughts, enough of talking everything out until he was blue in the face. The air inside was starting to feel stale and suffocating. Maybe a night out would help.

Chapter End Notes

* French translates to "help!" "thank you, mr. i'm extremely grateful." "you're welcome. it was nothing."

**This quote is from The Bridge of San Luis Rey. It's a line that has stayed with me ever since I read it many years ago, and I thought it was very appropriate for this conversation. :D

Chapter 8 is very nearly ready for editing so hopefully it will be a shorter wait this time! Finally moving our plot along a bit as you can tell from the Murder Husband date night development hehe.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> Here it is. Murder Husband Date Night. Please let me know your thoughts! Hope everyone had a pleasant weekend and a lovely holiday if you're States bound. I'm fairly certain my body is now compromised of 90% mashed potatoes and cheap wine after all the festivities. :P
>
> Must never forget to thank my beta @castellomargot for helping me sharpen up the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Abidjan was as buzzing with life under the cover of night as it was in the blinding tropical high-noon sun of their last visit. The energy had altered though, imbued with the exuberance of play rather than work. Most people weren't out running errands but were instead strolling arm in arm with lovers, friends, or family to unwind and shed the weight of the day's troubles in whatever method they preferred. A balmy breeze flowed through the night air, cooling the temperature from sweltering to tolerable.

Indecipherable French sailed past Will's head in rapid-fire sentences, but he liked the strange anonymity it bought him. Instead of feeling alienated and culture-shocked, he felt safe knowing that he had a convenient excuse to recede into the distance with an apologetic shrug and a quick "Je parle seulement un peu le français*" (although he was sure anyone could pinpoint his low level of linguistic mastery after just a couple poorly pronounced words). He had always found French to be an attractive language too, and there was comfort in being surrounded by the sounds of the elegant, flowing liaisons. As long as no one actually approached him of course.

Will lingered a couple paces behind Hannibal for a second, admiring how handsome he looked. He was clad in one of his signature three-piece suits although the solid black was an unexpectedly muted choice. Granted, he had accented it with a rich, plum colored button down and a paisley tie shaded in a different but complementary purple. Trust Hannibal to elevate a simple, tailored black suit in ways that would never have occurred to Will.

In the end, after suffering through racks of clothes with no inspirational muse whispering in his ear to suddenly equip him with the fashion sense he'd been missing his whole life, Will had thrown up his hands and surrendered. "Look, I hate backtracking on my demands so soon, but can I...have a little help here?" He had sighed with a fractious squint. "Of course, darling," Hannibal had replied with a self-congratulatory smile, voice all sardonic syrup. He selected a stark black jacket and pants for Will as well, this time paired with a sapphire blue button down.

"Complements your eyes, don't you think?"

"Sure, whatever. You're still buying me all the bourbon this city has in stock."

"If you imbibe volumes of that size, I fear you will be dead long before any of our life-threatening hobbies put you at risk."

Will had rolled his eyes and snatched the clothes from Hannibal's grasp, ignoring his paramour's smirk.

"Hyperbole, Hannibal!"

Bushman Café was a modern, stylish rooftop terrace restaurant that served fresh, local fish dishes for the rotating specials. There was a velvet-voiced chanteuse accompanied by a small jazz quartet at the far end of the spacious roof when they came in and an elaborate curved wooden bar sitting off to the middle of the right side. Well-dressed groups of diners were seated at tables under two large white tents with faux thatched roofs, holding wine glasses and craft cocktails. Every plate Will's eyes landed on looked mouth-watering. Lining the edge of the rooftop were more tables that were farther apart, allowing for a little more privacy. Hannibal greeted the hostess with a charming smile, and she cordially directed them to one of the tables on the edge. The view of the city skyline was stunning, lights from tall buildings dotting the backdrop of palm trees like metropolitan Christmas lights. They both thanked the hostess and began to peruse the menu.

"This is pretty romantic. Looks a bit too classy for the likes of Hamish though." Will smiled, appreciating the way the light from the flickering candle on their table accentuated the angles of Hannibal’s elegant face.

"Indeed it is. He will not be found in the surrounding area." Hannibal's eyes roamed over the menu.

"Oh?" Will leaned back and waited for an explanation.

Hannibal folded his menu shut and clasped one of Will's hands.

"Should you feel, after you have been lubricated by all of Abidjan's bourbon," He smiled mischievously, "that you desire to check on the whereabouts of one dubious Mr. Ritchie, I shall accompany you on a journey to quite a different part of the city. However, I did not feel that the destination of our first outing should be determined by his tawdry taste. I very much wanted to take you somewhere exceptional and worthy of the occasion."

Will blushed fiercely and silently cursed his face for betraying him. His smile widened as the wheels of connection shifted into place.

"This is kind of our first date, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. Technically, we haven't been out together in the conventional sense until now," Hannibal said offhandedly, expression deceptively blasé.

"Mmm-hmm. I'm sure it didn't occur to you at. all. Not while you were picking out that tie or this shirt," Will gestured to his own chest, "or this restaurant with that glamorous view of the city. Merci."

Will seductively raised his eyebrows as he took a drink of the water the hostess set in front of him.

"Merci, mademoiselle." Hannibal nodded to the young woman before turning back to Will. "Yes, I did consider it. Extensively in fact, but I know you can be rather shy about grand gestures and settings you deem to be too ostentatious. I did not wish to upset or embarrass you, especially considering the events of the past two days."

"You really can be very sweet," Will said quietly, eyes full of love.

The waitress arrived, and a flustered Will tried to sloppily communicate that he wasn't ready to order.

"Un instant s'il vous plaît*," Hannibal interjected.

"Thanks. My French is still...fledgling. Speaking of which, would you mind ordering for me?" The younger man asked. Being a foreigner no longer felt like a comfort but rather more of a hindrance as he looked down again at the incomprehensible menu.

"It would be my pleasure." Hannibal smiled warmly and ordered for Will when the waitress returned.

"So what will I be eating tonight?"

"One should never ask. It spoils the surprise."

"Well, I guess it's not like the surprise can ever exceed the culinary ones you've given me."

A moment later, Will's drink arrived along with Hannibal's wine. After the waitress left, he raised a suspicious eyebrow at his partner.

"You only specified the quality and quantity of the bourbon, not how it was prepared. It's a bourbon sidecar with tamarind syrup. Tamarind is a fruit indigenous to tropical Africa. The flavor is an intriguing marriage of sour and sweet just like the man about to consume it. I promise your masculinity will not be tarnished by drinking whiskey in a manner other than neat." Hannibal raised his wine glass in a toast.

Will clinked his own curved glass against the edge of Hannibal's as they locked flirtatious eyes.

"I did ask you to order for me. I reap what I sow." Will took a small sip of the cocktail followed by a bolder mouthful when the taste coating his tongue was found to be favorable.

"It's great," he begrudgingly admitted.

Hannibal nodded confidently, and then his expression changed, intense eyes inquisitive as they locked onto Will's.

Just then Will's dish arrived: aromatic charcoal-grilled local perch, attiéké**, and caramelized plantains pan-fried with onions and crushed, dried chili peppers. All traditional components to Ivorian cuisine cooked to perfection. Hannibal's plate consisted of herbed, smoked chicken in a tangy, spicy peanut sauce, sweet potatoes stewed in coconut milk, and smoky, grilled eggplant.

"I can tell when you have something to say to me. I can see you debating it in your head. You *do* know that, right?" Will took a few bites of his food as he waited for an answer, the flaky, savory fish pleasantly overwhelming his tastebuds.

Hannibal chuckled, eyes shining in the backlit darkness.

"Indulge me and forget that you possess that power for a few minutes, will you? I promise to be forthcoming soon enough."

"Alright." Will smiled but couldn't quite eradicate the unease that gripped him. Hannibal didn't seem particularly perturbed so Will did his best to cordon off his worries.

They ate their respective meals (Will speared a piece of chicken from Hannibal's plate without asking and snort laughed at the look of scorn it garnered) and made conversation easily, bouncing from topic to topic and laughing like any other normal couple in the restaurant. Nothing about their outward appearance made this date seem anything other than conventional. Still the conflicts of not long ago were brewing in the soup of Will's thoughts, and every brush of Hannibal's hand, every flirtatious look that bloomed a responsive heat within Will made him wary about what would happen the next time they were in bed together.

"Alright, you've had your recess from my probing empathy. What were you thinking about earlier?" Will asked as he downed the remaining swallow of his second drink, the alcohol warming his chest and loosening his tongue.

"I was thinking about our dilemma, and whether or not there is a solution wherein we could continue to safely explore our preferences without further endangering your mental health." Delicately pinching the stem of his wine glass, Hannibal finished the dark red liquid, eyes appreciatively closed as he took the time to let it drift over his palate to savor all the complex notes.

"And what conclusion did you come to?"

Taking note of their empty glasses, the young woman stopped by their table to ask if they wanted another round. Will glanced over at Hannibal for confirmation. He nodded, and Will smiled and affirmed that yes, they would like two more.

"What would you like to happen?" Hannibal leaned forward, elbows on the table and hands clasped together.

“I don’t want *it* to happen again, but I also don’t really want to stop our…whatever it is we’ve been doing.” The lines of Will’s face became more prominent as he frowned, perplexed by how to solve this equation. "But..."

The older man nodded encouragingly.

“Why do you think…why did that particular act trigger me? Logic would indicate that since other…” Will swallowed, feeling self-conscious about talking about his sexual preferences in such a public setting. He had no way of knowing who in the vicinity was an English speaker. “Throat intrusions…” Will squeezed his eyes shut, embarrassed at his word choice. “Don’t have the same effect, this wouldn’t either.”

Two full glasses replaced their empties. Hannibal took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts.

“I suspect it has to do with control. Or more accurately, a perceived sense of it. You explicitly expressed the desire for rough oral sex, but you never requested to be choked. I believe you felt that the situation had veered so far out of your control as to become dangerous. Primal instinct took over, and your mind replayed traumatic events to further trigger the fight or flight response. A memory of a time when you truly were powerless.” His words were so sterile, it stung. Part of Will wanted Hannibal to be tripping over himself to apologize for being the one who caused an event so traumatic it echoed in the rooms of his mind years later, hiding behind closed doors only to jump out when it had been hidden for so long he’d forgotten it was real. But that wasn’t Hannibal. *I am saying that your mind feels it was traumatized*. Those words made much more sense to Will now than they would have if Hannibal had said them in the distant past. He understood Hannibal’s motivations much better now; a statement like that didn’t sound delusional anymore. Will rolled his shoulders and took a breath, blocking out the elevated emotional response induced by the liquor and trying to remain reasonable and rational.

"So...knowing that...any suggestions?" Will looked at Hannibal, genuinely confused about how they could proceed.

“I believe we can find a way to manage and minimize the risk of a recurrence. If that is what you want.” Hannibal crossed his legs, an elegant hand coming to rest on his thigh, and the conversation flickered into therapist mode. The ghosts of their past sessions would probably always be in the room, a silent half-materialized, misty guest in the corner. But the apparition didn’t feel as threatening as it used to, even in the face of an incident like this.

“Okay, I'm listening.”

“To begin with, ground rules could be established. While surrendering to my will is the objective, there is no reason for guidelines to be absent. You might tell me what is off limits completely, what you envision to be beyond the realm of what you can withstand instead of allowing me to push until I discover it for myself. Or perhaps I could tell you what I am about to do instead of foisting the unknown upon you.” Hannibal searched Will’s cerulean eyes for some semblance of agreement.

“No…I don’t think it would be the same if I knew what was coming. I liked being blindfolded, robbed of awareness. It was exhilarating. The purpose would be defeated if you were narrating everything.” Disheartened, Will rested his head against the heel of his hand. He tilted his head to observe Hannibal.

“The pleasure is in the unexpected. The lack of a predetermined script,” The older man agreed, wetting his lips as his eyes roved over Will’s face.

“Han…er…Patrick?” Will internally scolded himself for forgetting to exhibit the appropriate caution. There hadn’t been much need to utilize the aliases since they had mostly been isolated at home.

“Do you trust me?”

Will narrowed his eyes at the absurdity of him still asking this, but his expression changed when he saw that Hannibal’s own remained austere. Besides, Will had to admit he would have his doubts as well if he had been on the receiving end of the words he threw Hannibal’s way last night.

“Yes. Yes, of course I do,” Will responded sincerely, leaning his body toward Hannibal without meaning to.

“Exposure therapy is a common treatment for PTSD as well as phobias and generalized anxiety. This would be unconventional, of course, and doesn’t precisely fall under that umbrella, but it can serve as a proxy to that. We might continue as we have been, albeit with caution and very slow escalation as to allow you to acclimate and use your safe word before any activity crescendos to the point of becoming a trigger. And if you do lapse into the grip of the past and find it will not release you, we could discuss it afterward and deconstruct your reaction together.” Hannibal’s piercing gaze was beginning to be uncomfortable. Will could tell he was concerned and trying to be vigilant for any objection from him, but it still made the younger man feel like a bug under a glass.

“Sex is therapy and therapy is sex? That can be a slippery slope with us. I don’t want to fall back into old patterns.” Will rubbed his eyes and groaned, head suddenly feeling like it was caught in a vise.

“I know. Neither do I. I don’t particularly want you to see the man who murdered Abigail every time you look at me either,” Hannibal whispered, stressing the last few words, *look at me*. His fingers absently stroked the base of the wine glass, eyes fixed on the spot on Will's neck that mirrored where he had cut her. “However, I suspected you would prefer not to stop and were unsure what other option remained. I would like to state once more that stopping is perfectly acceptable and worth your consideration. Creative sex isn’t worth losing you or causing you indelible pain nor is it worth suffering through round after round of past transgressions only to reach a stalemate. But..." Hannibal gracefully leaned forward again and lowered his voice, "There is one more option that occurred to me when you reluctantly admitted the excellent quality of the beverage I chose for you."

Will's pulse fluttered with a mixture of anticipatory excitement and apprehension. He waved his hand to indicate that Hannibal should continue.

"Submission doesn't always have to be physical or revolve around pain. Perhaps we should direct our focus toward methods we already know to be successful. Acts that mortify you and, in tandem, heighten your arousal, servitude followed by praise, binding you in more elaborate ways next time, and extending control to aspects like how you are clothed and what you consume while we are out. Only on occasion of course. I wouldn't want the connotation to spoil and shift from titillating degradation to uncomfortably demeaning. And naturally these are all things we would both monitor, checking in with one another on a regular basis. Neither of us can have absolute clairvoyance when it comes to predicting what may trigger you in the future, but I believe this to be a sound approach for mitigating the likelihood of any unpleasant surprises." Hannibal took a graceful sip of wine and looked at Will, patiently awaiting his assessment.

A myriad of emotions crossed Will's eyes. Annoyance, desire, skepticism. At first the idea of Hannibal telling him what to wear or eat sounded like an infuriating recipe for disaster, a way to rob Will of his identity and mold him into the visage of a man more refined. More like Hannibal. But then he thought about the shiver of pleasure that rushed through his whole body when he pleased Hannibal in their games. How good it felt to kneel obediently at his feet, how the fawning look his lover flashed him tonight as Will slipped the carefully chosen black jacket over his slender shoulders felt like an elixir he could drink from for *days,* an ambrosia that could sustain him forever. His cock twitched in the tailored slacks, and he sighed resignedly.

"While I have my reservations about letting you dress me like a *doll* for you to play with...it's not..." Will averted his eyes and gazed out at the city skyline as he felt his cheeks growing hot. He wondered how noticeable it was in the soft lighting. "Without its appeal. But it has to stay *occasional*. Too much and it would eclipse my own sense of self I think."

"I agree. I have no intent of instigating irrevocable change. I quite like you as you are." Hannibal smiled adoringly and reached out to hold Will's hand.

"Admit it. You've been suppressing the urge to torch my entire wardrobe since the day we met." Will slanted his eyes accusingly.

"I see no harm in instituting a little variety in the form of garments that showcase your exquisite shape rather than obscuring it. Your clothing choices always seem designed to hide rather than highlight."

"I value comfort over appearance."

"The two concepts are not at odds with one another."

“Oh really? And how is the decision to wear a waistcoat in Ivorian summer working out for you?”

“How do you find your jacket?”

“Warm but…breathable somehow,” Will relented. *Damn you and your high quality fabrics.*

Hannibal took a victorious sip of his wine, smiling smugly into the glass.

"I realize I've largely been at your mercy and will continue to be since I don't have access to my old closet, but promise me that when I *do* finally buy some clothes on my own, you won't dispose of them as soon as I have my back turned?" Will narrowed his eyes and took a drink.

"I wouldn't dream of it, dear." Hannibal stroked Will's hand with his thumb, and arousal thrummed through the younger man. He suddenly desperately needed to be closer. Without thinking, he scraped his chair across the hard tile floor so they were side by side instead of across from each other. Will nuzzled against Hannibal's neck, covering the smooth skin with a soft kiss. Sobering up for a second, he abruptly jumped back and put a few inches of space between them.

"I'm sorry...is this okay?" Will's face felt flushed, the tropical night air suddenly more humid than it was only a moment ago.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Hannibal ran his fingers through Will's wavy hair, eyes glistening and half-lidded.

"I don't know...seems like something you might find rather *gauche*." Will chuckled and curled his fingers around Hannibal's wrist.

"Not here. Not now, no. Perhaps don't attempt to put your hands anywhere they shouldn't be, but I'm certainly in favor of you unabashedly kissing me in public." Hannibal grinned and leaned in to gently kiss Will's lips.

"Mmm I don't know if I want to take you home and fuck you or hunt with you," Will whispered against his lips.

"Welcome to the eternal predicament from whence I will never escape," Hannibal said with a small laugh.

Will laughed in response and cradled the back of Hannibal's neck.

"I have to warn you that I'm teetering on the edge of drunkenness."

"I know. Perhaps we should adjourn for the evening soon," Hannibal admitted with a sigh.

"The third drink is always the tipping point. I never think it will be, but it absolutely *always* is. I'm nearly forty fucking years old." They both broke out into carefree laughter. "I should *know* this by now, shouldn't I?"

"I am equally guilty where this faulty intoxication logic is concerned."

"You're not drunk or you wouldn't still be capable of stringing together sentences like that," Will scolded, kissing Hannibal gently, moaning faintly at the warmth of his mouth and teasing drag of his stubble.

"By that rationale, neither are you."

"I said *edge*. Teetering. Not toppled over just yet." Will licked his lips, and his eyes darkened, sinister impulses infiltrating his countenance as icy resolve coursed through his veins. "Show

me where he is."

Hannibal grinned, pernicious and ravenous, the points of his sharp teeth peeking out from between plush, pouty lips.

"As you wish, my love."

_____

“Where are we going?” Will peered out the window of the cab, gleaming city lights appearing warped through the raindrops collecting on the glass, globular deposits that burst and dripped in segmented little streaks glowing yellow and white. The rain had started as they left the restaurant, the two of them jogging to the street to hail a cab, gasping and laughing in relief as they got in the backseat. It was almost an absurd romantic comedy moment as Will glanced over at Hannibal’s damp face and smiled. Then he remembered the purpose of the rest of the evening, and their exchanged looks turned conspiratorial.

“Somewhere I would vastly prefer not to journey, but an area of Abidjan I think you will hardly be surprised to learn is Hamish’s favorite,” Hannibal quietly informed him.

Hannibal’s hushed tone made Will realize that perhaps they shouldn’t speak in too much detail. One could never be too careful. In lieu of anything better to do, Will allowed more base instincts to take over and nibbled on Hannibal’s neck, a hand creeping up his thigh.

“Trying to distract me?”

“Just passing the time,” Will whispered. “I know you said our lives wouldn’t be *just* insatiable sex, but there will always *be* insatiable sex, won’t there?”

“Now that I have you, do you really think I could ever keep my hands off you?” Hannibal held Will’s face between his palms and kissed him slowly, tongue tasting every corner of his whiskey-sweetened mouth.

Will mouthed at his jaw, lips trailing up to his ear.

“When we get home, I’m going to bend you over every fucking surface in the house and rim you until you’re dripping,” he murmured into Hannibal’s ear.

“The things you say to me,” Hannibal gasped, almost undone with lust. He clutched Will’s hip and bowed his head. Will was a little startled to see it but welcomed the surprise.

A knock came on the partition separating the front and back of the cab and was accompanied by a stern warning from the driver.

“Alors, vous n'avez rien à craindre, monsieur*,” Hannibal replied, straightening his posture and returning to his polished, formal public persona. He withdrew from Will’s embrace, removing the hand from his upper thigh although he twined their fingers together.

“What did he say?” Will asked after a moment.

“A rather crudely phrased request about abstaining from any activities that might result in blemishes to this backseat,” Hannibal coolly notified him.

“You seem a little miffed. What did *you* say to him?” Will’s eyes hardened as he looked at the man and then back at Hannibal.

“I simply said he had nothing to fear. And yes, I am somewhat irritated. It was a rather presumptuous thing to say based on a kiss or two although I suppose in his occupation, one comes to except a certain level of crass behavior. However, there was no need for him to use the words he did. That is still inexcusable.” Hannibal’s own gaze turned into fire for a second, flickering away as he moved his eyes from the driver back to Will. “Don’t pay him any mind.”

Hannibal stroked Will’s cheek, and the younger man wanted to press him further about what hateful words had left the cab driver’s lips. He felt a fierce protective urge envelop him but forced himself to relax, taking Hannibal’s advice and focusing instead on what the rest of the night held for them. His mind meandered for a minute, wondering if anyone had flashed disdainful looks their way during dinner, Will far too in his own world to notice at the time.

A few silent minutes later, they arrived at their destination. Hannibal, not one to forgo social graces regardless of whether or not they were deserved, tipped the man adequately despite the livid exchange of earlier.

It didn’t take long before Will understood *exactly* why this was the Scotsman’s weekend playground. One look at their surroundings, and it was impossible to ignore the fact that prostitution was legal in this country. Sex workers were chatting up their johns and ducking into hotels and nightclubs (which were on virtually every corner) together. Instead of French being the dominant spoken language, English, German, and others Will couldn’t distinguish bounced back and forth between people roaming the streets. It was clear that this area was frequented by expats more than locals.

It was around eleven, and the neighborhood was in full swing for the evening, people starting to sway drunkenly as they strolled down the sidewalk, their voices rising above normal day-to-day levels in a way that pounded against Will’s eardrums like a sudden spike from a microphone.

“I feel seedy just being here,” Will said, reaching for Hannibal’s arm.

“As do I. Distasteful though it may be, I promise we are in the correct locale for our task,” Hannibal gestured toward a bar with a patio out front a few buildings down, “Let’s sit.”

They sat down in a couple black metal chairs arranged crookedly around a matching table.

“Do I even want to ask how you found out where he is tonight?” Will folded his hands over his stomach and leaned back, shrewd eyes raking over the spectacles playing out in front of businesses he now realized weren’t *just* nightclubs and hotels. “It’s really strange to see… brothels? That sounds too Dickensian, but I don’t know what else to say that doesn’t sound…”

“Prurient? Déclassé?” Hannibal crossed his legs and joined his hands over his knee, looking altogether too refined to be in this part of town.

“Yes, exactly. After having grown up in a country where it’s illegal, it’s odd to see them out in the open like this.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. Such a strange culture around sexuality in America. You would prefer to not be confronted with the reality of it so the deepest perversions and taboos seep through the cracks in the strangest, most repressed ways, forcing sex workers to lead lives under clouds of shameful association while those who seek their services rarely suffer the same consequences and hardships. They are often the same people, usually men of course, who publicly demonize the practices and industries in which they secretly indulge. Until the light is shone on them so that they may scatter like the roaches that they are of course.” Hannibal smiled faintly, dark eyes glowing with wicked whimsy against the backdrop of garish neon lights.

“Hey, I resent the use of the collective ‘you.’ Spare me the ‘you’re a painfully provincial American with antiquated attitudes sitting next to a superior, evolved European’ routine. Let us not forget that you indulge in secret taboos of your own.” Will rolled his eyes and turned his attention away from the crowds to look at his attractive partner. “I’m not repressed.”

“Ah, but were it socially acceptable to do so, I would gladly step forward from the shadows. I have no need for self-containment as I feel no ignominy where my predilections are concerned. And I regret to inform you that you were about the most repressed one could possibly be when you came to me.” Hannibal smiled patronizingly and stroked Will’s hair.

When you came to me. Not ‘when I met you’ or ‘when we first got to know each other.’ ‘When you came to me’ like I was already yours and always had been even if neither of us knew it yet.

“Well,” Will leaned in and lowered his voice, taking a look at their surroundings before speaking again, “I’m not anymore, now am I? Do you need me to let you fuck my mouth and call me a good boy in public to *prove* that or is the private sector still sufficient for now?”

The corners of Hannibal’s lips quirked up, the skin around his eyes beginning to pleasantly crinkle as Will smirked back at him.

“I can already tell you boys are going to be *fun*.”

A youthful, energetic voice sounded right behind them, and Will’s face went from ivory to crimson in one second flat. *Good job checking everywhere but behind you, Graham. How long has it been since you’ve been in the field again?*

“I apologize for that remark, but I imagine that is far from the most uncouth comment that has assaulted your ears in this region of Abidjan.” Hannibal smiled at the young woman with a little repentant bow of his head. She had soft, round features. Cherubic cheeks and friendly, warm brown eyes set in dark, blemish-free skin. Will couldn’t place her accent. It had the jaunty rhythm of Spanish mixed with the smooth flow of French and something else he couldn’t identify.

“You don’t know the half of it, monsieur. Can I get you two gentlemen a drink?” The young woman smiled amiably and rested a slender-fingered hand on her hip.

“Is that a Mozambican accent I detect?” Hannibal queried before Will could respond.

“Ah, most people can’t place it. Not even people who *should* be able to if you ask me. Good ear you have. Você fala português?*”

“No, I am afraid my command of the Portuguese language is both very minimal and delivered with a disgraceful accent. I believe learning French and Italian first spoiled me. Quite a challenge to be able to both incorporate and ignore the elements of the two to properly speak it.” Trust Hannibal to start a linguistic conversation while about to drink next to a whorehouse on the hunt for prey.

“Don’t feel too bad. It’s the runt of the romance languages, and I kinda like it that.” She winked and curled a hand around the back of each of their chairs. “So what’ll it be, handsome boys?”

“I’m told I have to provide him with his weight in the finest bourbon tonight. Neat, please.” Hannibal gestured to Will, charming smile in full effect. “And I’ll have the same.”

“Makes my job easier. I’m Ada. Flag me down if you need anything else. I’ll probably be in the back fending off the *less* pleasant ones.”

Hannibal tilted his head.

“Ada means first daughter, correct?”

Ada playfully pursed her lips and leaned toward Will, eyeing Hannibal through slanted eyes as she faux stage-whispered to Will.

“Is he always like this?”

“Oh Ada, you have no idea. I am long-suffering. The *longest*. Not enough whiskey in the world to make up for it to be honest.” Will laughed as he realized that the “person suit” Hannibal had emerged. Partway at least. Watching him roll out the charm hearkened back to the early days of their acquaintance. Even through all of his standoffish defense mechanisms, that charisma had hooked the tip of a slender finger around Will, admirable in that way that it can be to look at someone who is gifted in an area in which you are barren. Hannibal always made it look so easy. Will wondered, not for the first time, whether or not it really was. Or did practice become second nature the way a champion gymnast flies through the air in a deceptively effortless arc?

“Well, don’t worry. He’s lucky to have you, and he knows it. I could tell from the way he looked at you when you reminded him what you can *do*,” Ada spoke within earshot of Hannibal. She squeezed Will’s shoulder before sashaying away to the bar in her candy apple red dress.

“I like her,” Will said as he turned back to Hannibal.

“Me too. And it was the secretary.” Hannibal slid his chair closer to Will’s so their knees just brushed.

“What was?”

“You asked if you should dare to inquire about my method of gathering information. I had Hamish’s business card as you know. Secretaries can be fountains of knowledge about their superiors just waiting for the opportunity to burst. Undervalued, underpaid, and, as I’m sure you can imagine is the case with a young woman employed under Mr. Ritchie, treated in a most discourteous manner. She was extremely helpful.” Hannibal kept his eyes on the street and absently traced his fingers around Will’s knee.

“Wait, you said you’d tell me why you took his business card. I completely forgot about that. Was it just for this purpose? Did you…” Will glanced around before continuing, “have plans for him right away?”

“No, but I imagined we might in the future. That is only a portion of it though. There was more I intended to tell you.”

Ada came by a few seconds later and set two tumblers of bourbon in front of them.

“Thank you, Ada,” they said in unison. They looked at each other in mild horror while she chuckled delightedly.

Hannibal turned his attention away from Will again, and the younger man sighed testily.

“Are you going to explain or make me beg for an answer?”

“Not now, Elijah. We have other matters to occupy our attention.”

“That we do, *Patrick*,” Will intoned a little crossly, “And we should probably look like normal people making conversation while we *attend* to those matters.”

Hannibal sighed and shifted in his chair to face Will. When he spoke next, it was barely above a whisper.

“While you pursued the Chesapeake Ripper, you were perplexed by how he chose his victims. Eventually, you came to understand that they all shared a certain…tendency to violate his code of mannerly conduct. But that still did not connect them in such a way that would allow you to precisely pinpoint potential targets. They were still floating indeterminately in the ether. It was not a sound method by which to capture him so your focus was reallocated elsewhere.” The din of the stumbling, drunken groups littering the streets easily obscured their conservation, but Hannibal’s voice remained hushed. The impersonal use of the third person sent chills down Will’s spine. Was he using it to reduce any possible danger from eavesdroppers or to curb the pang of disappointment from remembering those days?

“Yes.” Will nodded and downed a large mouthful of bourbon.

Hannibal paused and averted his eyes. Anxiety seized Will for a moment.

“I am completely certain that revealing this next detail will put me on the receiving end of a mocking diatribe about how archaic my behaviors are. Some remark about how indicative they are of my supposedly advanced age regardless of their very practical application…I had a rolodex of business cards.” Hannibal hesitated, and Will’s reservations threatened to turn to laughter. *So many comebacks.* In the end, Will quite literally bit his tongue, determined to keep a straight face and not submit to Hannibal’s extremely accurate prediction.

When he was satisfied that Will wasn’t about to launch into a string of age related jokes, he continued.

“When it was time for my ‘sounders of three’ as an infamous FBI profiler once described it,” Hannibal’s eyes flitted to Will’s with some mixture of pride and disdain, “the rolodex would reappear and unsuspecting people whose fleeting encounters with me had often long since passed would be selected for a dinner date.”

Will didn’t know how to comment on that. There was something so very Hannibal about the process. Clinical, methodical, organized, *detached*. People became faceless names in a ring of cardstock like chickens in coops waiting to be plucked for the slaughter. Then they became faceless dishes on a delicate, gilt-edged dinner plate. A well-thought out practice that was nearly untraceable. Rinse, repeat.

Suddenly, hearing Hannibal speak of himself in the third person was less eerie than listening to him calmly relay his methodology as if describing how he might draft a shopping list.

Will sipped his bourbon in silence, the pleasing burn hitting the base of his throat on the way down.

“You are troubled by this,” Hannibal stated. Straightforward. Not upset.

“Troubled? Who, me? Never,” Will said with a wry smile, rotating the tumbler in his strong fingers. “Disconcerted maybe.”

“Care to expound on that?” Hannibal took a drink and examined Will’s face over the rim of the glass.

“The lives of innumerable people reduced to cards in a box, you flipping through them like you’re picking out a tie…it’s chilling imagery.”

“Are we about to rehash certain topics?” Hannibal sounded weary as he leisurely sloshed the amber liquid around in his glass.

“No…being unnerved isn’t the same as feeling judgmental.” Will clasped Hannibal’s chin between his thumb and forefinger and kissed him, deep and reassuring. “You just still terrify me a little and probably always will, but you already know that.”

A smile spread across Hannibal’s lips, and he kissed the scar on Will’s cheek, now mostly concealed by his beard.

“How else would I keep such an insubordinate one as yourself in line?” Hannibal smirked and finished the rest of his drink.

“Shut up.” Will rolled his eyes and took one final gulp of whiskey. “So what are we doing here…watching johns dip into hotels with prostitutes all night because we’re making a documentary about wild expats in West Africa?”

“Patience is key if you intend to learn how to do this and do it well,” Hannibal solemnly stated, eyes scanning a small, boisterous crowd of men stationed in front of a bar on the other side of the street. “Alas, your poor attention span appears to be prudently timed as one particular intoxicated Scotsman has just emerged. Follow me.”

Hannibal put down some money for their drinks, anchoring the bills under one of the heavy tumblers. As they left, he genially waved goodbye to Ada who smiled and waved back.

As they stalked closer to Hamish and his cohorts, Will’s skin erupted in goosebumps. He pled with his heart, urging it to refrain from beating out of his chest. He gripped Hannibal’s hand and pulled him to the side. Hannibal stopped walking and met Will’s eyes.

“Um…forgive me for being incredibly nervous, but is there some sort of plan I should be aware of?” Will whispered, gaze alternating between Hannibal and the group of men several yards away, Hamish’s features now coming into clearer view.

“We follow at a safe distance. We do not alert him to our presence until the precise moment we wish for it to be. Beyond that, I had imagined we would bide our time until inspiration took hold for you.” Hannibal’s eyes crinkled with pleasure as he looked at Will, enamored and clearly trying to contain his excitement.

“That’s…a lot of pressure. What happened to teaching me how to ‘do this and do it well’?” Will huffed out a swallow breath and watched the men stumbling around on the pavement, laughing at some idiotic joke.

“You’re more capable than you think. Your empathy has allowed you to wear the skins of many. When it comes time to lure him, I have the utmost confidence you will call upon that and wield it to your benefit. While you are perhaps the most genuine and sincere person I have ever known, you are still an excellent actor when you need to be.”

“That makes me sound like a cunning master of deception. I don’t know how I feel about that,” Will laughed.

“It makes you sound like a master of the art of human connection, interpreting the signals and cues countless others do not have the skill to recognize and absorbing the intricacies to paint a vivid picture no one else ever could.” Hannibal laced his fingers with Will’s, his other hand cradling his cheek, thumb brushing lightly along the bone. Even after months of intimacy, such a simple touch still made Will radiate warmth from the inside out. “I understand the reservation about using your powers for a more sinister purpose than you are accustomed. I recognize the adjustment, but where you would find condemnation from others, you will only find acceptance and admiration from me. I don’t consider it alarming. I don’t balk at the presentation of your immeasurable talents; I never have. It’s artful. It’s pure beauty beyond

that which I could have ever dreamed, and I love you for it, Will. I will never denounce you for it."

"Thank you," Will whispered, cheek leaning into the heat of Hannibal's palm. Will's eyes wandered over to the covey of loud men. They were heading inside the neon lit bar, carelessly flicking cigarette butts to the ground without bothering to extinguish the smoldering remains. Hannibal and Will exchanged a quick, knowing glance and headed toward the bar. Taking a deep, stabilizing breath, Will buttoned his jacket and followed Hannibal inside.

The club was dimly lit with dingy red rope lighting lining the walls. Lamps with red bulbs hung suspended from the ceiling over black tables in semi-private alcoves along the left wall. Each recessed area was composed of a semi-circle shaped booth made of what looked like black and red faux leather. Some were curtained off while others were completely or only partially exposed. The music was every bit as horrendous as that which Hamish had insulted them with during his stay at the house down the road. Too loud, too repetitive, too uninventive. Will winced and cast a pained look Hannibal's way. He returned it with jaded eyes that said "believe me, it's insufferable to me too." *Christ, you're rubbing off on me, Hannibal.*

They strolled through the establishment casually, furtively glancing into each booth they passed to scan for any sign of their target. Finding nothing (but a whole lot of…everything else in which most people wouldn't care to witness random strangers engaging), they proceeded through a beaded curtain to a back room, ignoring the shameless, libidinous looks curious strangers cast their way. Hannibal gripped Will's arm suddenly and nodded in the direction of a large corner booth at the back. Hamish and his friends were seated with a number of lingerie-clad women, clearly quite a bit younger than them, draped across their laps.

The two of them slid into a booth in the opposite corner where they could watch from a safe distance, the darkness of the bar an asset to their desire to remain hidden for now. A young woman sauntered by and slid in next to Hannibal, resting a long red-gloved hand on Hannibal's shoulder as she posed a question that Will couldn't begin to decipher in the muddied din of the place. Hannibal gently plucked her hand from his shoulder and unceremoniously moved it to her own lap. He replied and then she nodded, skittering away with a disappointed smile.

"Do I want to know what she asked you? Because it seems we've stumbled into a sex club, and those are words I never thought I would utter to Dr. Hannibal Lecter," Will whispered in his ear.

"Yes, we have and no you probably do not. Trust that I declined as politely as I could and simply ordered bourbon," Hannibal quietly responded. He licked his lips and playfully raised his eyebrows. "I imagine there are several place I *have* been that would shock you."

"*Really*, doctor? I demand details. And what's with the bourbon? Are you absorbing my habits through osmosis?" Will smiled warmly and settled in against Hannibal's side. Might as well use the setting as an excuse to get closer.

“We can trade stories another time. As for the marked change in beverage choice, I am sure it will not come as a shock when I say places like this aren’t exactly known for their wine lists.” Hannibal paused for a moment, intently observing Will as though he could see straight into his brain if he tried hard enough. “I do hope you will not take this as an attempt to administer pressure or rush you in any way, but has any inspiration struck regarding how we advance? I must confess that now is one of those times where I greatly wish I could indeed read your thoughts.”

The young woman returned with their drinks and floated away with a coy glance and a gloved hand trailing along the surface of the table.

"Actually, it has. But it's going to require us pretending to be as disgusting as he is. Are you up for that?" Will's facial muscles tightened to a near grimace as he played through hypothetical scenarios in his head. He fortified his resolve with a large swallow of bourbon, piercing gaze steeped in animosity as his eyes found their target across the room.

"I'm happy to be whatever you need me to be." Hannibal smiled deviously, spellbound by the darkness in Will's face and all the possibilities that it held.

Will strode past Hamish's table, slow and purposeful. His friends had dispersed, some disappearing into curtained rooms with women, some leaving altogether. Ritchie was visibly intoxicated, the redness of his cheeks far beyond the regular flush of the warm weather, focus wavering as clumsy fingers cradled a drink.

“Elijah! Patrick! S’feckin’ surprise to see you lot here.”

“Hamish! You’re all alone. Not used to seeing you without a full crew.” Will brandished his most amiable, running-into-a-friend smile although he didn’t think he needed to put much effort into the construction of a friendly façade. The Scotsman was too drunk to take note of any crack in Will’s demeanor, and he was none too bright to begin with even when sober.

“They’re all weak, man. Can’t stick it out to the end,” he slurred, raising his glass before taking a big swallow, drops of whiskey dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. Will wanted to turn his head to witness the imperceptible tightening of Hannibal’s lips, the pupils that were no doubt dilated a fraction in concealed disgust right now. But he chose to keep his eyes on the man in front of him for now, shifting into vigilant hunter mode. “Sit, gents! Have a drink on me. Least I could do.”

He slapped the faux leather of the booth with a sloppy hand and scooted in to allow room for the two of them. The pair took a seat, Hannibal sliding in behind Will to allow him to take charge of the situation.

“Gotta say…m’ a bit confused, lads. What’re ye doin’ here? This is more o’…” Hamish waved about with a meaty hand, struggling for the words.

“A place for straight guys like yourself?” Will allowed a little bitterness to taint the last word, confident that Hamish was too out of it to notice. Hannibal gave Will’s thigh a firm squeeze.

They exchanged glances, and Will smiled. *I've got this.*

"Aye aye. Not a lotta cock around these parts for the likes of ye, but I certainly *can* direct ye to it if ye like. There's all sorts a dirty shit goin' on around this part of the city. Annnnyytthhiinng yer in the market for." His wink and crooked, slimy grin made Will want to vomit, but he kept it together, revulsion expertly hidden.

"You know what they say about assumptions, Mr. Ritchie." Will smirked and raised an eyebrow.

"Aye, right?" Hamish leaned back and eyed the two of them with some combination of skepticism and perverse delight.

"Elijah's palate is…exceptionally broad. I've progressively widened the breadth of his tastes over the years. He was rather repressed when we first met. I was very happy to enlighten him." Hannibal grinned wickedly, and Will beamed at him, thoroughly enjoying being part of a joke no one else was privy to.

"Tidy, tidy. What's yer main fancy, lads? I'm always 'appy to help. It's what I'm known for." Hamish flagged down the young woman who had tended to Hannibal and Will's table when they first arrived. Will was amazed that he kept the sleaziness to a minimum when he ordered their drinks. Just a "sweetheart" and a toothy grin. "That why ye never joined in when we were neighbors? Too busy with yer own filthy goings on? Didn't want any interruptions?"

"Something like that," Will said, eyes mysterious and baiting, and took a sip of his bourbon. "If you find you're ever in the mood to push your boundaries, you might try one of our parties instead of a place like this."

"Color me intrigued. Details, gentlemen, details! Don't leave me with one finger on the cliff now!" Hamish laughed and slapped the table, the force of it sloshing the amber liquid of their new drinks.

"We wouldn't dare betray the confidentiality of our guests. It would ruin our reputation. Discretion is quite essential in such circles." Hannibal's smoky voice was growing thick with drink, and Will wondered if his own comportment was giving away the fact that they'd been drinking for hours now. *Fuck. We better keep this short.*

"Well, that's no fun! C'mon. Give us a hint!"

"How about we *show* you instead? It's strictly invitation only, but you *were* our neighbor." Exchanging feigned glances of deliberation with Hannibal, Will resisted the urge to roll his eyes at Hamish's gullibility.

"It was remiss of us not to at least have you over for dinner. Very poor hospitality. I propose we make it up to you by offering a temporary seat at one of these…functions. Tomorrow, if you have no other obligations?" Hannibal took a sip from his glass and stared Hamish down over the rim.

"Alright alright, now we're talkin'. Always down for a dirty surprise."

“Two conditions. You tell *no one*. Breach of privacy ruins the whole thing. We wouldn’t be allowed to continue doing what it is we *do* if word were to get out to the wrong people. Second thing, you await our instructions. Location and time is always revealed the day of. Adds an extra layer of protection, mystique. You get it.” Will’s tone dipped low and covert as he leaned in close. *Let him think he’s oh so lucky to be a part of this secret club.*

“This is startin’ to sound illegal, lads.” Their victim leaned in to match Will’s posture. “And wouldn’t you know, that kinda thing is just my bag. Trust me, if there’s one thing I can do, it’s keep a filthy secret.”

The Scotsman grinned from ear to ear, and Will suppressed a full body shudder. He didn’t want to know what Hamish meant by that, and he was only growing more confident by the moment that this man deserved everything coming to him.

“Tomorrow. We’ll call you.”

“Ye got it. Somethin’ tells me it’s gonna be *well* worth my time.”

Oh, you have no idea.

Chapter End Notes

* French is as follows: "I only speak a little bit of French." "One moment please." "You have nothing to fear, mister." (Hopefully it's all correct. It's been YEARS since I've written any French, but I've kept it simple here so I think it's accurate.) Oh, and I guess this is probably evident from how he responds, but Ada is asking Hanni if he speaks Portuguese :)
** attiéké is a grain made from ground cassava

Also, are any of you interested in the geography of where they live/where they've gone? If so, I might embed something/post links here in the notes.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

AT LONG LAST, I HAVE RETURNED. Sorry for the delay! Both my beta and I got hit with a double bill of Adult Life and the holidays.

I really, really hope this chapter resonates with all of you because I think it's the best work I've done so far. I'm really satisfied with it to an extent that's pretty rare for my insecure ass. Also, this chapter has nearly everything. Drunk Hannigram? Check. Emotional teary-eyed Hanni? Check. Murder Husbands actually murdering? Check. Philosophical Hannigram pillow talk? Check check. Smutty smut? CHECK.

As always, please let me know your thoughts. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As they walked down the street in search of a cab back to the boat dock, Will was overcome with giddiness, both from the quart of bourbon swimming in his blood stream and the knowledge that they had just set the foundation for a trap. *Together.* This was finally happening after all the years of strife and obstacles between them.

"You ever have that moment where you don't realize how drunk you are until you stand up? Like the sheer inertial force of sitting has kept it all at bay, and then wham! A tidal wave of 'dear god, how much whiskey did I drink?" Will chuckled and clamped his hand over his mouth, a little unsure if Hannibal would be annoyed by this rambling display.

"Not sure if I've previously been acquainted with that feeling, but I certainly am now," came the surprising reply. Not slurred exactly, but Will did recognize the elongated vowels and rounded consonants from the only other time he'd seen Hannibal drunk. "Can you get us home?"

"The boat won't be a problem, but neither of us are in any shape to drive the car from the dock no matter how short the distance."

"Walking it is. Just like the night we arrived," Hannibal mused fondly, reaching for Will's hand.

The cab ride went by in the blink of an eye, and Will made sure his focus was as razor sharp as possible when it came time to navigate the water. It was only a ten minute journey, shortened by the use of the rented speedboat over the sailboat.

The walk sobered them up to more coherent levels, and they both descended upon the cold water from the pitcher in the fridge as soon as possible, downing a couple glasses in a row with ungraceful, greedy gulps.

“You did say you wanted to drain Abidjan of its whiskey resources,” Hannibal chastised with a sly smile.

“Yeah, and what’s your excuse? No one said you had to match me drink for drink.”

“I was caught up in the merriment of the occasion. Felt celebratory.

“Was it a dangerous, idiotic move?”

“No. I wouldn’t like to adopt this as our general strategy in the future, but tonight was an exception I do not regret. We waited until he was alone so no drunk friends of his can claim to have seen us although they would make unreliable witnesses anyhow. Nothing we said tonight could point Hamish to our true identities, and it would be easy enough to call and cancel if there were reason to be wary. We would dissolve in his memory as a vague recollection of the strange but otherwise unremarkable gentlemen he lived down the road from for a week.”

“What about Ada?”

“Waitresses in such establishments are beholden to unspoken pacts of secrecy lest they lose their employment or become victims of retribution by disgruntled adulterers looking for someone to blame. Besides, I believe she appreciated a couple of well-behaved men at her table for a change. Being polite goes a long way. Now, can you liberate yourself from conjectures about future obstacles for tonight? I promise they will still be there in the morning.” Hannibal leaned against the kitchen counter and neatly crossed his legs at the ankles.

“Hannibal Lecter. Always cool as a fucking cucumber.”

“I do what I can.” Hannibal chuckled.

“You don’t seem bothered by how much I swear. Why is that?”

“You don’t tend to direct it *toward* someone with vitriolic intent. It’s usually for emphasis. Just the nature of your speech patterns.” Hannibal shrugged. “Or when you’re sexually excited...which I’m sure I don’t need to explain the appeal that holds for me.”

Will glanced at the wall clock above the breakfast nook. It was just after one in the morning.

“I’m not tired yet. Are you?”

“Far from it. The blood thrums under my skin with vivacity.”

Will broke out into peals of laughter, palms covering his eyes. He laughed so hard he doubled over, wheezing and clutching his stomach.

“Do you need to be hooked up to a respirator, Will? Or are you able to recover on your own?” Hannibal tilted his head and rested a warm hand on Will’s back.

“I’m sorry…” Will sucked in air and tried to avoid succumbing to a new wave of laughter, “It’s just…a person has a point A and a point B, right? You start talking and your goal is to get to point B, but you? You take the longest, wordiest, most indirect route you can every time. And sometimes it’s just hilarious.”

Hannibal dropped his hand from Will’s back and rolled his eyes. He was mildly aggravated, but Will thought he detected a hint of amusement underneath.

“Aw, don’t be sulky.” One last broken laugh escaped Will’s throat as he threaded his arms around Hannibal’s waist and rested his chin on a gracefully sloped shoulder. “You know I love your extravagant use of the English language, honey. Who else can turn a farmer’s market trip into a rumination on the transience of life?”

“You just called me honey.” Will could feel the stretch of Hannibal’s skin as he smiled against Will’s cheek.

“No, I definitely *did not*.”

“You most assuredly did.”

“Prove it.”

Breath ruffled his hair as Hannibal let out a vexed sigh.

“Sadly, I’m not in the habit of planting recording devices around our residence.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Indeed it is. Nevertheless, I will haughtily remind you of this moment in the morning.”

“And the alcohol gives me a very convenient excuse for not remembering. One which I fully intend to use.”

“I’m certain you do.”

“Did you…mind it?” Will cringed. *You can’t call a ferocious serial killer on the FBI’s most wanted list ‘honey’. What the fuck is wrong with you? You didn’t even say sappy shit like that to your old girlfriends. You are never touching a drop of that devil liquid ever again.*

“Every bit of affection from you sustains me,” Hannibal murmured into Will’s hair.

“Hannibal…” Will melted into the embrace, squeezing him tighter. “Can we move to the living room? I feel too lazy to keep standing like this.”

Hannibal nodded against Will’s neck and released him.

When they sat down on the couch, Hannibal draped his arm around the back of it and looked at Will in a curious manner as though awaiting the response to a question that hadn’t yet been asked.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You dangled a very enticing image in front of me during our cab ride, and I’m hoping you intend to follow through.”

Will’s forehead wrinkled in confusion for a second before smoothing out as recollection hit.

“*Oh*…that.”

“Yes. *That.*” Hannibal gazed at Will with a hunger that was so zealous, it nearly made the younger man dizzy.

“Are you sure you’re up for it?”

“Very much so. Enthusiastically brimming with consent.” Hannibal leaned closer until their lips were only a couple inches apart, patiently waiting for Will’s move.

“Good.” Will’s eyes traveled up and down Hannibal’s body, barely able to maintain a veneer of self-control with Hannibal looking back at him like that. When Will kissed him, it was a complete ravishing of his mouth, the quenching of a deep-seated craving. Clothes were discarded without care for where they landed, lips and tongues sliding across smooth skin until they were both panting and naked, feverishly rutting against one another. Will stood up, cheeks pink with arousal.

“Bend over the arm of the couch.”

Hannibal promptly obeyed, knees bent and feet on the floor, torso relaxed against the curvature of the fabric. Will sucked his bottom lip into his mouth as he surveyed Hannibal’s naked body, cock swelling at the sight. Moving to stand behind him, Will gently pushed his legs farther apart until he was exposed and ready for him. Hannibal’s muscles tightened under his hands expectantly, and Will coaxed them to relax with soothing strokes across his thighs and buttocks. He knelt on the floor and lightly scratched the arch of Hannibal’s ass down to the crease of his left thigh, watching the skin reddening under his nails. Having Hannibal laid out for the taking always left Will breathless, moist lips parting and eyes softening into utter awe. The last time he had been in this position, they were on the open water headed to an uncertain future. Will made a mental note to not let that much time pass ever again.

Firm hands caressing either cheek, Will ran his tongue along Hannibal’s entrance with the lightest, teasing pressure, biding his time before building up to bolder, harder swipes that drew the first small moans from his lover. Why had he ever been unsure of this? He had always loved going down on the women he had been involved with (although he wouldn’t dare leak that correlating information to Hannibal), and there was something very similar in this. Soft, warm, enveloping, and enthrallingly intimate. And above all else, this profound sense of *giving* that had always appealed to him in sex (probably partly due to the comfort of taking the focus away from himself) but especially did in intimacy with Hannibal. In deeper ways than he ever knew possible. It wasn’t just a physical act; he poured every nuance of their connection into it every time and saw the same reflected back in every responsive touch and sound from Hannibal.

The warm tip of Will's tongue dipped inside him, and Hannibal's hips stuttered back, breath hitching as he clutched handfuls of the couch cushions. Will pulled him closer, lapping at the smooth flesh eagerly in a quest to produce more beautiful sounds from the older man. Hannibal obliged, and Will desperately wished he could see what expression he wore as he pushed his face into the cushions.

"*Will*…" It was almost plaintive, a plea and an utterance of devotion at the same time. Will hummed against his skin, the vibration causing a tremble of pleasure to ripple through the man beneath his mouth. He traced invisible patterns with his tongue, obscene trails of saliva now dripping down his chin as he avidly licked and sucked at Hannibal's entrance. Licking his way up to Hannibal's tailbone, he dotted his back with gentle kisses until his lips reached the back of his neck.

"I love how much you like that," Will murmured, sucking on his earlobe.

"Then why did you stop?" Came the cheeky reply.

"So greedy."

"For you, always."

"Bedroom. I want more than my tongue inside you. If that's okay."

Hannibal gasped at the sensation of Will's teeth nipping tenderly at his neck.

"Yes, please. You don't do it enough," Hannibal declared, head swiveling to meet Will's lips.

Will furrowed his brow, an apology poised to spill from his mouth.

"I'm sorry. I didn't – "

"That wasn't a reprimand. Only a request for more." He smiled to assuage his partner's worries, and the gesture was returned.

The two of them rose from the sofa and made their way upstairs, fingertips brushing along skin to avoid complete separation. They collapsed on the bed, a mutual sigh escaping their mouths from the friction of being this close, every inch of their bodies connected as Will moved on top of him. Reaching into the nightstand to retrieve the lube, he smirked to himself. *I have a nightstand sex drawer with Hannibal Lecter.*

Hannibal spread his legs, eyes burning with want. Will could tell neither of them would last long. They were both too ready, too bolstered into voracity by alcohol and the need to prove everything was fine. Neither of them mentioned it, but the atmosphere was ripe with the necessity of wiping away the unsightly spot the recent mishap had left. Coating two fingers, Will massaged in circles around the tight ring of muscle, warming the sensitive flesh before plunging inside.

Hannibal groaned and hooked his legs around the middle of Will's back, pulling him into a kiss with a demanding hand at the base of his neck. Will pumped his fingers in and out with less care than usual, provoked by the insistence Hannibal made known in the way his knees

clamped onto Will's flanks. Their kiss transformed from a caress of lips into a rapacious *consumption*, a biting, snarling, animalistic thing that made Will's cock ache.

"*Will.*" This time it wasn't a plea but an unmistakable command.

Will was torn. The obtrusive force of biology was boiling his blood into a frenzy, emptying his brain of everything but the persistent urge to *take, take, take* what was being offered so temptingly. But the opportunity to withhold from Hannibal until he was begging was a rare one. Ignoring kismet didn't seem wise.

"Tell me what you want," Will purred, pulling back to gaze into those sharp brown eyes.

"I want you, Will," Hannibal breathily demanded, arms winding around Will's shoulders.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" Will thrust forward, teasing him with the friction of his cock rubbing against Hannibal's opening.

"Is vulgarity all you're after? How tedious," Hannibal mocked with a cluck of his tongue.

"Foolish words to say to the man you *want* so badly," Will laughed and rolled his hips again. Hannibal moaned and tightened his grip.

"Yes, I want you to fuck me, Will. Please," Hannibal dragged his lips from Will's jawline to the crook of his neck, "please," and back up to the curve of his ear, "*please*," before meeting his gaze. Will relished the desire he saw looking back at him, this daunting man so soft and pliable and delirious with need. All for him. It awakened something primal within him, all traces of second guessing from earlier in the evening erased. Since he had only done this a handful of times, it remained a source of insecurity for him. It was usually a struggle not to set off the taut trip wire traps in his brain at every overloaded, critical thinking turn. It was an internal conflict he tried to hide, but Hannibal would unfailingly notice and dispense some pearl of wisdom designed to augment his confidence. And it would work every time.

But he didn't need it tonight. He just needed Hannibal.

"Get on your stomach," Will whispered as he rolled off him. He loved being able to look at Hannibal when they made love, but right now he was compelled by the image of kneeling behind him, strong arm anchored around his stomach, teeth sinking into his neck until blood trickled down the slope of his shoulder, the arch of Hannibal's back against Will's chest.

Hannibal arranged himself on the sheets with his knees slightly bent, cheek resting on his right forearm. Will slicked his cock and positioned himself between the older man's legs and spread his thighs a little wider. Leaning forward, he began to thrust inside slowly.

"*Oh*," Will exhaled. The wave of sensation was almost a shock. For the second time that night, he filed away a reminder to never let this much time pass again. Hannibal was right. They didn't do this enough. He draped himself over Hannibal's broad back and nuzzled against his ear. "God, you always feel so good."

Hannibal turned his head to capture Will's lips, moaning into his mouth as Will began to thrust into the damp heat of him. His moans were less restrained than usual. Despite his penchant for encouraging Will to let go and release every sound of pleasure he tried to tamp down, Hannibal always maintained some measure of decorum. This was both maddening and irresistible to Will; it seemed impossible but yet predictable that he managed to still look at least halfway dignified while reducing Will to a writhing mess on the sheets. But tonight, they were united in their lack of composure, and Hannibal was completely uninterested in holding back.

Will pinned him in place with an arm looped around his torso, and out of a sudden curiosity, he curled an experimental hand around his lithe throat. Hannibal stretched his neck back to force Will's grip to tighten.

"Is that something *you* want? Is that why you tried it on me? *Ah fuck*." Will's train of thought was interrupted by Hannibal pushing back on his cock in a way that made his eyes roll back in his head.

"No, that's not why I tried it. And…I'm not sure," Hannibal faltered.

That's not like you.

Will loosened his grip until his fingers were barely grazing Hannibal's throat. He slowed his thrusts, his cock sliding in and out in a tauntingly torpid pace that actually made Hannibal *whimper*.

"What do you mean?" Will quietly asked.

"I am not certain I would be able to tell you when to stop," Hannibal whispered. "But I still want to come with your hands around my throat. Your cruelty wrapped in your love like a brutal kiss to my quavering pulse."

"Hannibal…" Will sighed, his cock twitching inside his lover as he pictured it: Hannibal's head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, mouth contorted in pleasure as he came with Will squeezing his neck. Abruptly, he used the arm around his stomach to yank him upward and back until Hannibal was seated in Will's lap, back to chest. A sharp noise of surprise escaped Hannibal's throat as he adjusted to the new position. Will thrust up hard, smiling at the groan it elicited from his partner. They started to move together, Hannibal eagerly slamming down to meet Will's driving hips. When Will leaned back to get a little more leverage, he inadvertently hit a spot inside Hannibal that made him moan and clutch Will's thighs, fingers digging into the skin so hard it almost hurt.

Will chased that reaction, holding Hannibal's hips in place with bruising fingers as he fucked into him harder, the pace growing more erratic and desperate.

"Tell me when you're about to come," Will stuttered between ragged breaths, firm hand grasping Hannibal's stiff cock and relentlessly stroking him toward orgasm. It wasn't long before Hannibal choked out a breathless, "now." Reaching up with his free hand, Will covered Hannibal's throat with his palm, thumb digging in below the sharp corner of his jawline, fingertips pressing into the left side of his neck. Hannibal's head fell onto his

shoulder, and Will was given the gift of that look he had envisaged only minutes ago. Except his eyes weren't closed. They were open wide and unflinching, telling Will everything he needed to know without uttering a single word: *Yes yes please thank you I love you*. He spilled onto Will's hand with a deep guttural groan, and Will released his grip to pull Hannibal close with both arms, kissing his neck and shoulder.

"You looked so beautiful, Hannibal," he murmured as he lazily resumed thrusting, his own climax a secondary thought, too absorbed in watching Hannibal come on his cock to care.

Hannibal wouldn't have that. He removed himself from Will's lap and turned around to face him. Grasping Will's swollen erection, he sank down and wrapped his legs around the younger man's waist. Dexterous fingers made their way to his face, cradling his cheeks as he stared into his eyes, a look of pure reverence on Hannibal's face.

"The very second I think you have awarded me with the highest possible honor, depleted your arsenal of all things new and wondrous, you give me more. Your very existence is so unexpected," Hannibal whispered, breath ghosting across Will's lips. He rode him in a frenzied rhythm until Will finished inside him, teeth clamping down on Hannibal's shoulder. He didn't bite hard enough to draw blood, but there was no doubt it would leave a lingering mark. All the tension of the past couple days floated away into the air, leaving Will sated and warm. They clung to each for a minute before separating to lie down, both spent and basking in the afterglow.

They lay in silence for a few minutes. Will rested his head on Hannibal's chest in the way that was now second nature. He lifted his chin to meet Hannibal's gaze, kiss-swollen lips parting slightly before closing again.

"Need I remind you that I can tell when you have something to say as well? In fact, your 'tells' are rather more obvious than mine." Hannibal smiled dreamily and ran a hand through Will's sweaty curls.

"I don't want to disturb the peace right now," Will mumbled.

"You won't."

He propped himself up on an elbow and rested his cheek against his fist.

"I'm sorry to keep harping on this point, but why *didn't* you ever kiss me? Maybe it's just because I know what it feels like now, but pushing me against the bookcase and kissing me until I couldn't fucking think seems like a solid manipulation technique to use on someone who already has their foot halfway in the door."

Hannibal sighed and turned on his side to face Will.

"It had to be your choice. Just like it had to be your choice to kill. I could set the stage, arrange the pieces in advantageous positions, plant suggestions, but it was up to you to interpret them and do as you wished." Hannibal smiled warmly and traced the length of Will's bottom lip with his forefinger. "Why didn't *you* kiss me? I don't see why the burden of action should rest solely on my shoulders."

“I didn’t know you were in love with me then.”

“Like hell you didn’t,” Hannibal laughed derisively.

“Just how drunk are you?” Will chuckled.

Hannibal bulldozed right past that.

“You strolled into my office, normally unkempt hair slicked to the side, jacket strategically slung over your arm, seduction in every millimeter of your countenance. ‘I’d like to resume my therapy,’” Hannibal adopted a mimicry of Will’s low, sultry tone.

“I was just…I thought you’d respond better if I made myself…” Will sputtered defensively before realizing he had absolutely no good excuses. *Fuck. Checkmate, Lecter.*

Hannibal tilted his head knowingly.

“Well…I didn’t have it all figured out then, Hannibal. It didn’t occur to me to kiss you. Even though it should have.”

“And that brings us to another factor. You were known to be straight identified, and I had no reason to believe that your attraction to me would cause you to deviate from that path. I suspected and hoped, but…” Hannibal hesitated, the crease in his forehead suggesting that perhaps he was unsure if he wanted to reveal any more. “I did not come of age in a time when it was easy to approach men without fear, especially if their orientation was uncertain or known to be heterosexual.”

“Tell me about that.” Will lowered his head to the pillow and ran a hand along Hannibal’s bicep.

“I don’t think an expansion on that topic is relevant.”

“Relevant?! You’re the man I love, and I want to know everything I can about you. You can’t tell me you don’t have the exact same impulse, nosy bastard that you are.” Will playfully jabbed Hannibal in the ribs.

“I will merely say that once you become well acquainted with the innumerable ways it can go very wrong very fast, you think twice about approaching a man romantically. Even if intellectually you know the risk isn’t as great as it was at other points in time. When the risk is one to your very life and wellbeing…extra precautions become ingrained.” Hannibal looked contemplative, eyes faraway as he presumably replayed some of these past encounters in his head.

“Did you kill them? The ones who were a risk to your wellbeing?” Will softly asked, moving closer to press his body against Hannibal’s.

“A great many of them.”

“So you *can* be a vigilante.”

“Personal vendetta isn’t exactly the same.”

“You knew they were a scourge on society. You didn’t do it just for yourself.”

“Maybe not,” Hannibal granted him.

“Tell me about the first time you slept with a man.”

“I find questions like that to be superfluous. What could be more revealing than what we already know of each other? When our souls have been bared and broken down in front of our very eyes to mingle as one, what importance can be found in mundane laundry lists of past engagements that meant very little to me?” Hannibal closed his eyes and rolled onto his back.

“God you are so…*you.* It’s *fun*, okay? Even if it’s not as insightful as learning each other’s psyches by heart or imprinting on each other’s fucking *souls*, I enjoy it. Besides, if you don’t divulge, you forfeit all right to ask me meddling questions. A privilege I’m sure you’ll want to hang onto.” Will smirked, full well knowing that appealing to Hannibal’s desire to know him better than anyone else was the key to getting what he wanted. His curiosity about Will was bottomless.

“Quid pro quo?” Hannibal’s lips spread out in a slow smile, and he opened his eyes.

“I solemnly swear that for every annoying question I ask you, you can ask me something,” Will agreed. “Besides, during our little trip to the red light district, you *did* say we could trade stories later.”

“Fair enough.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“You technically didn’t ask a question.”

“Semantic technicalities? Really? Why are you so awful and why do I love you so much?” Will squeezed the spot just above Hannibal’s left hip. “May I please hear about the first time you slept with a man? Does that phrasing please the professional contrarian?”

“If anyone in this bed is a professional contrarian, it’s you.” Hannibal shifted back onto his side with a small groan. “It was unremarkable as most initial encounters are. The fumbling lack of prowess that accompanies youth coupled with the added anti-climactic aspect produced by a miniscule capacity for human connection. Or at least, I thought it was miniscule at the time.”

Hannibal flashed Will a knowing look.

“It’s so hard to imagine you as a young man.” It was difficult to picture Hannibal as anything but fully formed. Once again, Will couldn’t help but wonder if he suffered from the same naiveté and clumsy beginnings we all do, learning his way through trial and error before finding sure footing. “What were you like?”

“That is a question for someone else. Hard to be objective when assessing one’s past self. Even with a memory as sharp as my own, we are all our own unreliable narrators. I know how I *felt*.”

“How did you feel?”

“Tightly coiled. Ready to spring forth and snap without warning. Not as controlled as you know me to be. My urges were wild, untamed.”

“Pazzi showed me a picture of you from when you were known as Il Mostro.” Will’s eyes glistened in the dark as he remembered that strange, beautiful day.

“How did I look?”

“Dangerous, cocky, sexy. It made me wish I could have known you then. That whole journey across the water to find you…so much of it was about ascertaining what you *were*…realizing the complete picture or at least finding out if that was possible. I went to your home in hopes that the atmosphere that shaped you would be the key. The final piece of the jigsaw puzzle.”

“And was it?”

“Yes and no. I learned more about myself than I did about you, but then again, those were really one in the same, weren’t they?” *Maybe he’s right. Maybe it is pointless to ask about the past.*

“Yes…I don’t know if you would have liked me then.”

“Why do you say that?” Will frowned. He hadn’t expected that.

“If you think I’m arrogant now, imagine how the sense of invincibility endemic to youth might exacerbate that.”

“Christ.”

“I was a tad incorrigible,” Hannibal admitted with the barest hint of a smile.

“Hey! How did this conversation get twisted around?” Will asked, pointing an accusatory finger.

“All you and the winding nature of conversation. I’m afraid you can’t assign the blame to me this time.” Hannibal traced Will’s collarbone with a delicate fingertip.

“Fine, fine. I repeat my question. Tell me about it.”

“He smelled like lilacs and spring rain. He had an admirable bone structure that inspired my sketching hand.”

“Obsessed with aesthetics even then?”

“Of course. His scent became acidic when he was afraid of me. I suppose I liked that.”

“Being feared?”

“Yes. His taste was bitter and sour and disappointing. I was bored before it was finished. As I said, unremarkable and a memory that would quite assuredly have faded were it not for my preternatural capacity for remembrance.” His eyes closed again, and he drew Will closer until his chin rested against the top of the younger man’s head.

“Did you kill him?”

“No, but I entertained the idea. I believe you have exceeded the limits of your turn. Is your father still alive?” The tensing of Will’s posture was subtle, but Hannibal felt it in his arms.

“I don’t know. It’s probable that he is. How old were you the first time you took a life?”

“Sixteen or twelve depending on your definition of what constitutes taking. Mr. Graham, as much as you protest my evasiveness, you have always been exceptionally talented at matching it.”

“You didn’t technically ask for any elaboration. I answered the question as it was posed.”

“Cunning boy.”

Will smiled against Hannibal’s chest and snuggled closer.

“What’s the difference between what happened at twelve and what happened at sixteen?”

“Causality.”

Will groaned and pawed at Hannibal’s chest hair.

“You seem to have caught a case of ‘The Vague’ again. What does that *mean*?”

“Is it *taking* if I manipulated events to cause a given result but did not directly wield the instrument of death? If my curiosity overrode my sense of moral decency and relegated my role to spectator as the final axe came swinging down…is the blood on my hands? What level of responsibility do you believe I hold for events such as Bedelia’s murder of her patient? Margot’s eventual vengeance exacted against Mason?” Hannibal’s tone wasn’t malicious. He was calmly presenting a philosophical quandary as he often did. And that was the thing Will had come to understand after all these years. As much as Hannibal’s circumvention could be classified as mind games, there was also a portion of it that really was just how his brain worked. He didn’t see the world in absolutes; that would be far too limiting. Truly *seeing* Hannibal Lecter was similar to the divide of opinion regarding existentialists: where one person might see a philosophy of despair, another might see an ideological spring of hope eternal. Hannibal was a man who refused to be boxed in, a man who was perpetually engrossed in the metaphysical queries he saw in everyday life, and while it could be exhausting and frustrating as all hell, it was beautiful and unique and challenged Will’s mind in all the best ways.

“I couldn’t ever definitively say,” Will sighed sleepily, eyelids growing heavy. “The line is very blurry.”

“Indeed it is.”

“And at sixteen?”

“Much more definitive. Inarguably so.”

As Will tumbled into sleep, his brain filled with speculative images that evolved into dreams like light passing through a prism. A young man with angular features and wolf’s eyes glowing like rubies in the dusk, pointed teeth gleaming in the dark as he crouched in a tree like a deadly forest fay, sandy hair blowing in the breeze, beckoned to Will with a slim, ghostly pale finger. When he got closer, the hues of his eyes mutated from predatory to exquisite as the boy smiled. Will reached out to touch his milky skin, and it was soft as down feathers and warm as the sun on a bright May day.

“Are you certain about this?”

“Believe me, I’ve done more dangerous tinkering in my garage. I’ve welded. I’ve fixed car parts and boat engines. It’s nothing I can’t handle.” Will raised his eyebrows as a sardonic smile formed on his lips. “Worried I’ll mar my face with more scars and won’t be pretty anymore?”

“I fear my unflappability has led you to be almost *too* comfortable. Do try to be serious for a moment as today’s pursuit does call for that.” Hannibal’s face formed into a steely mask for maybe the hundredth time that day. He was considerably less tolerant of Will poking fun at him today. Unfortunately for him, that was always addictive to Will and only made him push more.

“You’re grumpy today. Feeling a little hungover?”

“No. That is an extremely rare occurrence for me.” Hannibal let out a beleaguered sigh and continued to help unload the strange assortment of items. “The last time was in Italy actually. After I killed Anthony.”

Hannibal huffed in amusement, half smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“You say that like I’m supposed to already have the context.” Will held out a gloved hand, and Hannibal deposited a couple bricks into it.

“Apologies…he was a man who…” Hannibal regarded Will as he assembled the homemade foundry, muscles of his bare chest glistening with sweat from the afternoon heat. “He figured out who I was, in a manner of speaking. Enough to pose a threat. He implied that he had no objections to my true nature provided that he could join me.”

Will paused after he situated the crucible within the metal base. He picked up a marker and traced the area where he would be drilling, hoping he resumed working fast enough to avoid Hannibal observing the jealousy flooding his features.

“The thought of someone presuming they could ever take your place – ”

“Like Bedelia?” Bitterness crept into Will’s tone, and he turned his head away from Hannibal’s gaze to roll his eyes at his own expense. *Get the fuck over it, Graham. You took her leg and ate it in front of her. What more do you want?*

“No, Bedelia did not participate as much as I accused her. Anthony by contrast wanted to be a true partner, I think.” Hannibal stepped back to give Will some room and inhaled the heady summer air, the scent of the flowers from their backyard mingling with the sea salt spray carried on the wind.

“You killed him because he reminded you of me…of what we could have had.” Will cocked his head and looked up to where Hannibal was standing a few feet away, tall and slender. There was something sagacious in the way his perceptive eyes gazed off into the distance, long pianist’s fingers slipped into the pockets of his fitted trousers.

“Rather makes me sound like a lovesick schoolboy, doesn’t it?” Hannibal met his eyes, and they smiled at each other.

“Schoolboys aren’t usually that homicidal.”

“Debatable.”

Will laughed and nodded as he tightened the nut around the venting pipe with a wrench.

“Nevertheless, I got thoroughly intoxicated after that. Irresponsibly so. Perhaps I was reminded too much of what I wanted to forget. Apparently, I droned on about you a great deal, and I remember the distinct sense that this had somehow provoked Bedelia into a rage far greater than any threats or tangible dangers she had endured. I locked myself in the master bedroom so she wouldn’t slit my throat during the night, afraid I might be too inebriated to stir.”

Will covered his mouth with a perspiring forearm to stifle the laughter.

“It’s like a sketch comedy show except with a lot more bloodshed.” *You really were trying to go out in a blaze of glory, weren’t you? All the chips on the table.*

Hannibal smiled, but the spark flickered out of his eyes for a moment.

“Hey,” Will stood up and walked over to him, “Thank you for telling me that. It means a lot that you volunteered without being asked.”

“Last night I realized how much I want to share with you, and that it isn’t contingent on whether or not the information being shared is momentous. I felt like continuing on that path today.”

“That makes me happier than you know.” Will cupped Hannibal’s cheek and softly kissed his curved mouth.

“It’s impressive.” Hannibal gazed over Will’s shoulder at the now finished foundry. “I have always admired the way your problem solving skills extend to manual labor and deconstructing machines. Most people of your ilk tend to be academic-minded and not much else. It’s rare to see such a seamless marriage of the two.”

He cradled Will’s sun-warmed face in his palms and stared intently like he was cataloguing his partner’s expression for another entry in his memory palace, savoring the “before” appearance on this very special day.

“He’s so fucking odious. I can’t wait to…”

“Tell me, Will.” It tumbled from Hannibal’s lips with a breathless urgency.

“I want to look in his eyes and see the exact moment when he realizes he made the gravest miscalculation of his worthless life,” Will panted, ignoring how much of a sweaty mess he was in order to draw Hannibal closer, moist palm resting in the small of his back.

“You are so formidable. I always knew you could be. Maybe it would have been beneficial if our paths had intersected earlier. Perhaps we could have cultivated your strengths before the impulse to shun had become too deeply embedded.” Hannibal closed his eyes and pressed their foreheads together.

“I don’t think you would have liked me then,” Will whispered.

Hannibal chuckled at the echo of last night.

“My cunning boy…if attempts to lure me into imprisonment and attempts on my life didn’t dissuade me, I can’t imagine what in your past could have repelled me.”

“Likewise. Let’s get ready.” They both opened their gleaming eyes, predacious grins perfect mirror images of one another, foxes ready for the hunt.

“I hope you will not be too terribly bored by convening for a meal at our table before the main event. I must rectify my inconsiderate omission of a previous dinner invitation. Also, it is important to keep one’s stamina up before strenuous activities.” Hannibal flashed Will an impish smile as he set an expertly plated dish in front of him. Will was seated across from their guest while Hannibal was occupying the chair at the head of the table. *You only keep me around so you can finally have a cognizant audience for all the murder and cannibalism jokes, don’t you?* Will laughed at the thought as he mentally recapped some of the highlights (if they could be called that because some of his puns were truly terrible) from the Baltimore days.

Hamish leaned back sloppily in his chair, posture much more suggestive of a night out in his usual circles than a place at Hannibal's meticulous table. Will straightened his back and willed an expression of affability into place.

"You are right about that, Pat." Will forced himself not to cringe at the sound of Mr. Ritchie taking liberties with nicknames without permission or reason to believe it would be well-received. A glance over to Hannibal, the minute downturn of his eyes and subtle tilting of his head, showed that it was indeed *not* welcome. "Fuel for debauchery of any kind is always a good idea although this looks a lot more elaborate than anything I'd be havin'."

The Scotsman laughed at himself, and Hannibal stilled the clenching of Will's fist under the table, a steadying hand holding his in place.

"Tonight we have linguine dressed with an emulsion made from fresh sea urchin, bottarga of tuna, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, and Espelette pepper for a subtle touch of smoky heat. Sea urchin roe and parsley to garnish along with seaweed crackers made from a dough of nori, mirin, sake, and soy. Although we are in Africa, tonight Japan, France, and Italy have all managed to dine with us in this unique amalgamation of cuisine. And an Alsatian Pinot Gris to round off the culinary diversity." Hannibal lifted his wine glass in a toast, and the two men joined him.

"I only understood about half of that, but I think the gist is that you're a damned good chef." Hamish took an ungainly gulp of his wine before diving in to taste the food. "Where are you from, by the way? Couldn't quite place your accent."

"Similar to this dish, the globe is my domicile. I have resided in more corners of the Earth than I can delineate in the time constraints of a dinner. It results in an unidentifiable tongue that borrows from a large pool of others." Hannibal took a bite of pasta and chewed leisurely, gastronomic bliss written in his expression.

"You must be well off to keep traveling like it's your job. Love this house, by the way. Been dyin' to see the inside of it for years, and it does not disappoint. It's like the 20s threw up in here." Ritchie snorted and twirled pasta onto his fork.

"I might not use that exact descriptive language, but yes, the architect and interior designer clearly shared a singular vision. As for my wealth, it does help to inherit. Money so old that it traces back centuries is a well that is not so easily run dry."

"You lads sure are big on the vagueness. Not that I don't trust ye, but when will I have some more o' the nitty-gritty about tonight?" The Scotsman downed his wine and roughly set the glass back on the wooden table.

"Patrick tends to cling to the guise of an international man of intrigue, but I think he wears it quite well." Will gazed at Hannibal appreciatively before taking a delicate bite of the perfect dinner he was nearly finished with.

"Thank you for indulging me, Elijah. Mr. Ritchie, I promise the agenda for tonight will be revealed after dessert when our stomachs are sated and we have moved on to the aperitifs.

And on that note," Hannibal rose to clear the plates and met Will's eyes as he turned to leave the dining room, a silent cue to trigger the next stage of their plan.

"Would you like a drink? Patrick tends to get a little bit obsessive about the presentation of his food as you've probably guessed from the main course. I guarantee we'll be sitting here for at least fifteen minutes." The joke wasn't far removed from the actual truth so the sentiment slipped out easily. And if there was anything Will was certain their victim wouldn't say no to, it was a drink.

"Love one. Whiskey if ye have it." Hamish beamed at the prospect of more alcohol. Will could easily sense that their guest was afflicted with a boredom and impatience that was only growing, but luckily he didn't need to occupy him for much longer.

Will gestured for him to follow and stood up from the table to the wooden buffet at the end of the room. He plucked two tumblers from the bar accoutrement and filled them halfway from a decanter of whiskey.

"So how did you two fellas meet?" Hamish eyed him with curiosity, and Will couldn't help but chuckle.

"We worked together, in a manner of speaking. He was very…persistent in his wooing of me although I harbored my reservations for a while." Will smirked into his bourbon and took a drink.

"Why's that? Was he your boss? He strikes me as the type to run things."

"No, no. Nothing like that. There were just…conflicts of interest at the time, but they were all eliminated eventually." Will swallowed another burgeoning smile. *You're enjoying this far too much.*

"Alright, alright. I won't press, but ye aren't givin' me much to go on for conversation here." Hamish cocked a dubious eyebrow, and Will marched in to deliver the bait.

"Okay, it's time for me to be a little more forthcoming." Will set down his glass and reached for Hamish's, removing it from his reluctant grasp. He gestured for him to come closer, turning towards the buffet until they were both leaning against it, elbows resting on the surface. "There may be an ulterior motive behind us extending this invite to you tonight."

For a second, Will worried Hamish would grow some gumption and express misgivings about where the night was headed. But he acted predictably true to his idiotic character and only became more intrigued.

"I'm listening," Hamish eagerly said, leaning in closer until they were within whispering distance.

Will saw the dilation of pupils before he noticed the stiffening of his posture, the rigidity of the muscles in his arms. Surprise, fear, and then clarity about how terribly he had misjudged the situation, horror at the smiling face looking back at him as if to say "do you understand now?" It was remarkable just how many discernible emotions flickered across the eyes of

another person if you were *really* looking. Will savored every single one like complex flavors dispersing on his grateful tongue one at a time. Their victim's hand didn't even make it to his own neck to touch the sight of Hannibal's injection before he lost consciousness and slumped into Will's waiting arms.

The Scotsman groaned as he came to and broke into a ferocious sweat from his inept attempts to move anything at all: an arm, a finger, his thick, reddened neck.

"That would be the paralytic flooding your central nervous system. You are welcome to fight the effects, but resistance truly is futile. If you will allow me to indulge in a bit of self-congratulation, saturating your bloodstream as we speak is a cocktail I have perfected to a nearly non-existent margin of error." Hannibal unbuttoned his suit jacket with a deft hand and took a bite of his dessert. "Spiced red wine poached pears with vanilla mascarpone whipped cream. Shame you will not be partaking. They are quite delicious."

"You've outdone yourself as usual, mylimasis. Interesting choice too. More of a winter dessert really." Will cast a loving glance Hannibal's way before turning back to Hamish. The victim's eyes vibrated back and forth rapidly as he tried to direct his gaze to the direction from which he heard Will's voice. His eyes were still clouded as he slowly regained consciousness, groggily blinking and grunting with the effort to focus.

"I noticed we were both growing weary of the weather. I thought we might benefit from a nostalgic reminder of the winter season." Hannibal smiled sweetly at Will, and Hamish looked from one to the other, clearly bewildered as to what was happening and how their conduct could remain so normal as they spoke of winter and poached pears with no regard for his state of duress.

"Yer feckin' radge." It was a desperate, panting mumble.

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch that," Will replied apathetically, eyes fixed on his plate as he cut a careful sliver of pear.

"Ye sleekit bastards. What the fuck is this? Yer feckin' crazy!" He channeled all his energy into projecting the words out as forcefully as possible, spittle flecking his shirt. His lips were still sliding around messily, tongue lolling about as it does in a patient recovering in the dentist's chair.

"Crazy? No. To be crazy, one must not be conscious of one's motivations and actions. I assure you that dear Will and I are in full possession of self-awareness. What fate has befallen you, while unfortunate, is a time honored tradition. The natural, primal desire to kill, given to us by our ancestors. Written in invisible code beneath the surface of our minds. The craving to sink one's predatory jaws, proverbial or otherwise, into quivering flesh as it gazes upon you in helpless terror, synapses firing as they become overwhelmed by the realization

that they are the weaker being in this fight. They have lost. They have been bested in a way that is preordained, falling in accordance with the natural order of things." Hannibal's speech was delivered with a cool, measured tone. Hannibal at his most fearsome. Hannibal at his most commanding. Hannibal excelling in his element, in the arena in which he was master and sage. Will's whole body vibrated with pride and esteem. He was positively exuberant as he absorbed every second of the event to which very few had ever been granted a front seat. And without a doubt, no one had ever been granted it in quite the way Will Graham had.

"It's survival of the fittest, Hamish. And I'm afraid you failed the evolutionary test. All because of your poor choice in vacation rentals. Not that you could have known, of course. It's a strange twist of destiny for you to cross unlikely paths with Hannibal Lecter." Will took another lingering bite of his dessert.

The Scotsman tried to vigorously shake his head, but it only resulted in the veins in his forehead bulging as the redness traveled upward from his neck.

"And is that not beautiful? Are we not blessed to be a part of this great god's plan, guiding us to unknown destinations with veiled ruses to bring about events we aren't privy to until the very moment of their arrival? You will rejoin the Earth again soon, Mr. Ritchie. Dissolving into the soil and feeding the ecosystem to further life with a greater purpose than before, doing far more service to the planet than you did while alive. That's immortality. And isn't that what we all covet?"

"That's…that's twisted feckin' shite to spin, and I ain't buyin' any of it," Hamish sputtered out, regaining control over his tongue.

"Perception is everything. Hannibal taught me that. Or rather, he reminded me…reinforced the idea and allowed me to embrace it instead of renouncing it. That saved me in ways I didn't know I needed." They paused to exchange affectionate smiles before both turning back to their target. "But I imagine anything he has to impart would be wasted on you."

"To that point, are you familiar with the expression 'one shouldn't play with one's food'? Historically, I've been known to do just that." Hannibal layered a bit of spiced pear and whipped cream on his fork and took a thoughtful bite. "When the pig possesses the elements of a suitable plaything, that is. You don't particularly hold anything of interest to either of us so I regret to inform you that we will be keeping this brief. The most compelling theatrics of your story will be taking place after your brain has lost all function."

"You won't get away with this," Hamish growled. Will was grateful for their remote location. If the Scotsman's anguish turned to screams, the only audience would be the native wildlife. "Who *are* you people?!"

"Don't be cliché now, Mr. Ritchie. Life isn't a schlocky action movie," Will scolded as he pushed back his chair and strode over to the end of the table, placing a firm hand on the back of Hamish's chair and leaning closer, tone menacing and full of warning. "I know you obeyed our instructions. You're too careless to do otherwise, and people aren't particularly worried about you when you disappear for a few days, are they?"

A helpless, animal noise erupted from Ritchie's throat, but otherwise he was silent.

“Well, I applaud him for at least refraining from some trite insistence to the contrary,” Hannibal said with an amused canting of his head.

Hamish’s fingers twitched almost imperceptibly from where they rested on the dark wood. He was strapped down at the forearms and his midsection just as an extra precaution. Hope flitted across his wide-blown pupils, but Will shook his head.

“Don’t drown in optimism just yet. As Hannibal said – ” Will turned on his heel to walk away and wet his bottom lip, eyes squinting as he considered Hamish’s second question, “huh, his name didn’t seem to ring a bell for you. I guess word hasn’t traveled this far yet. A comforting thought actually. Thank you for that. Anyway, as Hannibal said, he’s perfected this recipe. Your slow return to mobility has been timed perfectly for our purpose. It’s a bit unsophisticated for him perhaps, but I thought it wouldn’t be as satisfying if you weren’t able to struggle a little when we inject you.”

Will’s sapphire eyes flashed fire and smoke as he regarded Hannibal. Hannibal himself was overwhelmed, lashes now wet with unshed tears, his vision for the two of them fully realized beyond his wildest dreams, unfolding before them like the shimmery curtain of fantasy pulled back to reveal something more grandiose, more opulent and epic than any daydream even the most dizzying of intellects could conjure. Will nodded and smiled. *I know I know I feel it too.* The younger man bit his trembling lip and lifted his eyes to the ceiling to chase back the welling of his own eyes that threatened to spill onto his cheeks if left unchecked.

When he looked back down and found Hannibal’s eyes once again, they collected themselves simultaneously, an unplanned yet impeccably choreographed dance just like the night they slew the dragon.

They both set about their assigned tasks, fated and bound to *this*, to their mutual appetites, to *each other*. As Will turned on the blowtorch and began to melt the silver into an unlikely lethal injection, his pulse soared and his breath refused to regulate. He couldn’t quell the euphoria and adrenaline overtaking him, and for once he found that he couldn’t be bothered with the trifling *want* to subdue it. Not even for a single second.

“Now, I’m not sure this will make the image in my head come to fruition, but Hannibal is fond of reminding me that mistakes are necessary along the path to perfection. So I guess you’ll be our guinea pig for this method.”

“Come on, lads! I’m beggin’ ye, don’t feckin’ do this! What the hell did I do to deserve this?!” Hamish thrashed and yanked at the leather straps as best as he could. He had regained some coordination, but they were choosing to administer the injection before too much muscle control was restored. Even without the bonds tethering him to the chair, they would have had the upper hand.

“Quite simply, the cause can be distilled to this: you were rude. You offended our sensibilities at every turn, deepening your guilt to indescribable levels by my assessment. My standards require much less bad behavior for justification than Will’s. I have certainly killed for more minor offenses, but I’m afraid you passed rung after rung on the ladder of impropriety. Frankly, you should be grateful you remained alive this long. Had I encountered you years ago, when I was still acting alone, and had it coincided with my schedule, you might not have survived past a day.” Hannibal and Will exchanged a quick glance and nodded before both injecting him in the brachial arteries on each of his arms. Will easily found the intended point of injection from Hannibal’s earlier guidance and pushed in the plunger of the syringe, draining it of the poisonous metal.

They both stepped back swiftly and waited.

At first, nothing happened. A blanket of still quiet enveloped the room. Will swore he could hear the dripping of sweat down his forehead, the twitch of his own eyelids, the rustling of the fine hairs on the back of his neck.

Then Hamish’s arms began to quake before giving way to full on convulsions spreading through his whole body, arrhythmic jerking and spasming overtaking his torso and limbs until he resembled a man in the electric chair suffering current after current of fatal voltage. The capillaries in his eyes burst until all the white surrounding his irises was blood red, and finally, the imagery Will had hoped for trickled from the corners of his eyelids. It wasn’t pure silver in color, and in retrospect, he should have expected that. It was mixed with his blood, tainted by it and mingled with it like a demented paint palette for some macabre artist’s canvas. It was a strange color Will couldn’t quite name. Almost rust yet also the dark grey of a sky before a storm. Some drops of it were more sienna tinged with maroon as they escaped and slid down his cheeks. They glistened and shifted between these colors when he peered closer, a bloody iridescent rainbow under the artificial lights of the dining room. The strange, unique beauty of it made Will’s heart soar and weep. Despair flashed across his mind as he thought he may never see this again. And then he *remembered*. He remembered, and he looked to his right to see his lover, enraptured and rendered speechless as he watched Will.

While he couldn’t know for sure, Will felt certain with every fiber of his being that Hannibal had been watching him this entire time, caring not for the untimely end of the detritus before them but preferring to focus on seeing that demise through the eyes of his partner. Capturing every expression of wonderment and disbelief that colored Will’s face as he witnessed his design come to life. His first truly plotted kill. The first time the muses spoke to him in earnest detail and compelled him forth into the abyss to complete the picture that singed pockets of his brain with a brand he couldn’t shake until the deed was done.

He felt cleansed and renewed. Birthed, washed, and clothed like a babe by a mother’s hands. He had wondered if it was too soon, if they should have been more cautious and kept their cravings at bay until the forces of Jack and everyone from their former lives dissolved like grains of sand washed too far out to sea to be found again. But now the only thought hovering on the raw, bitten edges of his tongue was “why did we wait at all?” What could be more hallowed than this?

“Hannibal, I – ” Will tried to give voice to the words, but his leaden tongue couldn’t shape the syllables. How do you communicate the inexplicable?

“I know, Will. I know,” Hannibal choked out, his voice so close to being swallowed by emotion. He held Will’s face and kissed him. He kissed his forehead, his eyelids, his cheeks, his lips. Both of them left wordless from the culmination of this night, they poured every sweet, profound feeling into the joining of their mouths. They broke for air, panting and silently crying as they gripped each other tightly, almost in an attempt to steady their swaying feet as much as a need to be closer.

“I didn’t even…did he scream? I couldn’t…I just kept watching every…” Will laughed, giddy and lightheaded as his knees began to buckle.

Hannibal braced his arm at the small of Will’s back and slowly lowered them both to the floor where they clung to each other even more forcefully. Will’s nose pressed against the side of his neck as Hannibal threaded one arm around his shoulders and the other about his waist.

“Will…*Oh Will*,” Hannibal gasped, squeezing him like he might float away into the atmosphere if he didn’t hold on. He kept repeating his name, worshipfully and softly like a sacred incantation.

Still struggling in his attempts to articulate anything at all, Will settled on answering Hannibal’s whispered prayer with an endless chorus of “I love you”s. Will lamented that moments this perfect had to end, but he knew this would be far from the last one of its kind. They held each other for a while longer, neither sure how much time had passed. The vast black of the sky outside deepened into a hue so dark, it seemed to consume everything within it. Carefully, like children stumbling on unsure legs to take their first steps, they both stood up from the floor and turned their attention back to the corpse in the dining room.

“I need to display him,” Will quietly stated. “I know it’s risky. I know I shouldn’t want it. I know I should just ignore everything inside me screaming to – ”

“Will.” Hannibal grasped his hand and interlaced their fingers. “Tell me exactly how you would like to present him.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, a huge thank you to my beta @castellomargot. Getting and utilizing that feedback is an invaluable step in my process. :)

I hope all of you had some relaxing holiday time these past few weeks, and don't worry. I already have the first draft of chapter 10 ready to go into the editing stages so you shan't have to wait as long to find out how these boys are going to display the nasty victim!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> I have returned from the depths of the brutal winter! I'm refraining from adding tags so that you'll be surprised. :) I'll just say that this chapter has some old friends teehee.
>
> I've always been very insecure about my plotting abilities so I apologize for any sloppiness. I tried to pay extra editing attention and to keep the flow of action rolling so hopefully you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They worked through the night, and it was half past one in the morning when they loaded everything they would need into the car. There was a clearing off a dirt road a few miles away that made the perfect stage, and Hannibal was confident they could accomplish what they needed to within a couple of hours. Will had bought most of what he wanted for the tableau when they were purchasing the items for the foundry. He hadn't been sure if he was going to go through with it, voices of reason shouting pragmatic arguments over the clamor of his vision, but he selected the objects off the shelves as a man in a trance, no control over the actions of his own hands. Hannibal observed with delighted intrigue but didn't press him about his intentions until the moment arrived.

Although Will had previously confessed with fervor his image of Hamish as King Midas made a fool of by Dionysus, neither of them had raised the subject again. There was a tacit agreement that it would put them in needless danger. But after Hamish bled silver, and they sank to the floor in each other's arms, ecstatic and alive and in love, Hannibal knew what Will would say before the words hit the air. It still amazed Will how much they didn't even need words sometimes.

They moved together in the dark with practiced ease, setting up their grisly creation like two infernal architects toiling tirelessly in the pre-dawn stillness. When the pair stepped back to admire their handiwork, only a few tweaks were made here and there before they nodded in agreement. It was finished. It was finished and it was theirs and it was *beautiful*.

Only a few stray rays of pink and orange light were poking their heads above the horizon, but they would need to leave soon. They couldn't wait until dawn fully broke. It was a shame. Both of them dearly wanted to see the scene in full glittering, brilliant sunlight, but it was far too great a risk. And they certainly didn't need any more jeopardies thrown into the predictive cards of fortune today.

Hamish was swathed in a loose curtain of dark purple velvet fashioned into a robe, folds draped around his shoulders and under his arms, a golden tasseled cord cinching it shut at the waist. He was resting on his back with his head turned outward, dull, fixed gaze eerily

penetrating the night. His head rested against his bicep, arm bent slightly at the elbow and fingers outstretched like Adam reaching for God. His arm was painted gold, gradually fading into his complexion the closer it got to his body. In lieu of a proper crown of jewels, he wore one woven from leaves and vines painted gold, an approximation of a laurel wreath. Golden grapes spilled from his mouth agape, a cluster of them positioned toward the back of his throat as though he had been asphyxiated by them. A trail of red wine dribbled out of the corner of his mouth and down his neck and chest. It wouldn't be long before it dried from deep vermilion into a flaky plum. A perfect evenly stitched seam ran from the middle of his chest to the right breast from where they had removed his heart. Will idly wondered how long it would be before anyone found this scene, if nature would have ravaged his body and ruined the display, climate and wild animals wreaking havoc on the decaying corpse, bits of flesh sniped away by hungry beaks, rain washing the shimmering paint from his fingertips.

"I wish I could take a picture. My memory palace isn't as eidetic as yours." Will pressed up against Hannibal's side and gave their tableau one last long look.

"You will remember, but I will describe it to you in detail should your memory ever fade. This will not be a night I will ever forget. I have wanted to stand side by side just like this for so long. Gazing upon our artwork together, the world falling into tranquil silence around us." Hannibal kissed Will's hair and inhaled his scent, cherishing every individual note, the floral sweetness, the hickory woodsmoke, the faint edges of molten metal still clinging to his sweat-moist, and pulled him closer.

"Is it everything you hoped it would be?" Will tilted his head upward to meet his eyes.

"As with every milestone we pass, it exceeds expectation in the most sublime way. I haven't words for the fullness in my heart at this moment. I couldn't transcribe the song that resonates within my blood. Know that it is incomparable and priceless," Hannibal whispered, fingers combing through Will's hair.

"Thank you for waiting for me all these years." Will kissed him deeply as the first morning rays tickled his neck with warmth. Will being Will, the ecstasy only lasted another ephemeral minute before dread took hold. "We have to get out of here."

"I know." Hannibal reluctantly released him, and they moved quickly to the car, neither of them vocalizing what they couldn't ignore. They had to leave this temporary home behind, and there was no time to waste.

By the time they set foot in the foyer, Will had capitulated to a downward spiral that he made no attempt to chase away with self-talk or analyzation of cognitive errors. Stubbornness replaced any healthy anxiety-reducing behaviors, and he internally cursed himself for doing this to Hannibal so soon after giving him such a highly anticipated gift. In a floundering effort to lessen the strain on him, Will chose to be wholly silent and cope with the panic on

his own. Needless to say, this made little difference in the grand scheme of things since the perspicacious Hannibal Lecter could smell his distress from a mile away.

“Will…I have many safeguards in place, and we are still several steps ahead of anyone who may wish to locate us. I am sure you are familiar with the adage ‘we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it’?” Hannibal firmly held his shoulders, forcing him to make eye contact. “We have not even begun to approach the bridge, and when you allow yourself to confront reality instead of surrendering to the whispers of dread, I know you will see that clearly. I am happy to list the solid facts for you if it will help.”

“I feel kind of pathetic asking for that though. I’m sorry I’m ruining this.” Will rubbed his eyes, the exhaustion finally catching up to him now that the adrenaline was fading. They had been up for about twenty four hours straight, and it would be more yet before they could rest.

“You are not ruining anything, Will. This is a reaction that is to be expected, and frankly, I think you should applaud yourself for keeping it as contained as you are. Five years ago, you would not have been capable of that feat.” Hannibal smiled warmly and dropped his hands to Will’s waist.

“I love you so much,” Will whispered. In spite of himself, he smiled back, worries receding into the distance. They weren’t completely eroded, but he knew Hannibal was right. On the strength of that truth, his agitated mood lifted several notches, and he began to sort through the debris cluttering his thoughts.

“And I you, darling. So inconceivably much. Now, would you like me to elucidate what I had imagined as a probable next step?”

“You really have my fucking number, doctor,” Will sighed. “Yeah, I’d really like that.”

A few weeks later

“Is it him?” A groggy Alana croaked into the phone. It was four in the morning in France, and while she had been hesitant to answer, part of her had been waiting for this call ever since she read the first Tattle Crime report exploitatively detailing the wreckage of Dolarhyde’s murder. Jack had made attempts to contact her during the initial investigation. Maybe for assistance, maybe for guidance, maybe for simple confirmation that she was safe. She wasn’t sure which, and she hadn’t been curious enough to pick up the phone and answer. Margot had eventually fielded one of the calls in the bathroom while she thought her wife was asleep, and that had seemed to bring about an end to it. Alana wasn’t asleep though. She heard snippets of their conversation (“it’s best if…Jack, hasn’t everyone suffered enough…I won’t tell her that…maybe…just let some time pass”) from where she lay in the luxurious,

high thread count sheets, trying to use the comforts of affluence to spurn her inquietude. It didn't work. She laid half awake, suspended in that strange limbo of insomnia where one was neither dreaming nor lucid.

In that way, she might as well have picked up the goddamn phone months ago. What did it matter if she was going to fight for sleep anyway? Something intuitive stirred deep in the pit of her belly when he called on that particular morning. It had been weeks since his number polluted her call log. This was sudden. This was different. This was a warning. Every cell within her screamed that she could just as easily continue disregarding the elephant in the room until it evaporated like stale smoke, but even as the thought arrived, she knew she wasn't going to.

"It's a mutilation scene with an organ missing and a reference to mythology designed to pointedly mock the 'pig' for his sins. He was cut with surgical precision when they removed his heart," Jack explained, his voice rough with lack of sleep and stress. He clicked through the photos on the laptop as he spoke to his former colleague, a growing sense of conviction spreading through him.

"Is it *him*, Jack?" The words tumbled out more irascibly than intended, and Alana instantly felt compelled to apologize. Jack was dogged in his quest to bring Hannibal down and had previously been so at the expense of his interpersonal relationships and the sanity of his friends, but he *was* still a friend. She knew he was well-meaning, but it was hard to convince herself of that right now when all she wanted was to finally have the separation she had naively hoped an ocean would provide.

The deliberate pronoun choice didn't escape her. *They removed his heart*. One could rationalize it away by saying he was only trying to communicate that he didn't know who the culprit was. It could be a man, a woman, a pair, a whole fucking gang of mafia henchmen. But that wasn't why he chose to phrase it that way.

"I don't know." Jack closed the laptop with an exasperated click and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. He almost regretted contacting her this early, but he hadn't slept since receiving the intel late last night and knew he couldn't hold out much longer. "It could be. Hard to say without going there to see it person. And the one man who could tell us for sure isn't here. But he may be *there*."

"You don't think…" Alana whispered, covering her eyes with her forearm. She groped blindly on the sheets before remembering that Margot was staying overnight in Paris before her meeting with the gallery owner in the morning.

Back in Baltimore, Jack's expression was grim, the lines on his face showing his age as he replayed the events of months ago. Events they all helped set into motion. *We fake an escape.* He didn't respond with anything other than labored breathing.

"Jack, he tried to cut his head open. He sent someone to kill his *wife and child*." Alana refused to acknowledge how careful they were being to avoid Hannibal's name as though it was an ancient, powerful word that might invoke his destructive presence.

“Alana, Will looked us both in the eye and played us for fools. He poured us whiskey and toasted like it was a goddamn celebration, full well knowing what he planned to do. Now maybe he did it to kill him. Maybe he was convinced that was the only way, but maybe…just maybe that man who told me he wanted to run away with his *friend* was the one hatching the plot and feeding it us like the oblivious idiots we were, playing right into his hand. Maybe they hatched it together. *I don't know*.” Jack paused and rubbed his forehead, squeezing his tired eyes shut. He felt his volume climbing to heights he knew were unfair to Alana. This wasn't her fault. When he spoke again, his speech was quieter and less hurried. “I've never really *known* when it comes to Will. He's an enigma, a tool I thought I could wield but underestimated time and time again. And here we are with history repeating itself.”

“We don't know that, Jack. Besides, it would have taken a miracle of mythic proportions to survive that cliff.” Alana got up from the secure embrace of the bed and reached for the crimson silk robe draped over her vanity chair. She started to make her way downstairs to brew some coffee. There wasn't going to be any hope for rest after this.

“You and I both know that the ‘mythic’ becomes reality with this man. If you can call him a man at all. He could survive a damn nuclear holocaust,” Jack spat bitterly.

“How did you find out about this anyway? You said it was in the Ivory Coast?” She smiled sweetly and whispered “Non merci, je vais le faire” as Marcel (living with servants was something Alana had reluctantly became accustomed to) swiftly came to her aid. “Margot told me Kade Prurnell essentially froze all your resources and forbid you from looking into it anymore.”

“She did, but you don't put in as much time here as I have without making contacts all over the world. Contacts that have other contacts and so on. I have alerts in place *everywhere*. Some at embassies, some less official. This one was less official. It's way under Kade's radar.”

“Won't she be suspicious when you board a plane to West Africa out of the blue?” She put the water on to boil and leaned back against the granite countertop, arms crossed over her chest.

“Then let her be suspicious. When it comes to Hannibal Lecter, I went a hundred miles past caring about protocol a long, long time ago.”

“Jack, just…*don't*.” Alana's voice was pained and quietly ferocious, at the end of her rope but too tired to raise her voice.

“Don't what, Alana?” Jack sniped, cracking his aching back as he rose from the desk chair for the first time in hours.

“Don't go there. Leave it alone for once.” She turned the burner off as the kettle sounded its high-pitched whistle and poured the boiling water into the glass French press.

“And then do what?! Let it be on the heads of some other police force? Let blood we indirectly spilled be some other country's problem? Let their citizens be unknowingly picked

off by a criminal more elusive than any we've ever seen?!" Jack was incredulous now, hoarse voice growing louder with every exasperated word.

"*Yes*," Alana hissed into the phone. A few drops of scalding water landed on her hand as she slammed the kettle back down on the stainless steel stovetop. She yelped and thrust her arm under the cold stream from the kitchen faucet. "Yes, Jack, that's *exactly* what you should do. Hasn't it been our burden long enough? Hasn't it been *yours* long enough?"

"You know I can't do that." Jack's angry tone was replaced by an eerie determination, a man who wouldn't be diverted from his mission by any force in this world. "I helped set the beast free. It's my responsibility to end it."

"Well, I can't stop you, but I can tell you I don't want any part of this," Alana firmly declared. *Will thought it was his responsibility to end it, and look what it cost him.* She filed the thought away, knowing full well it wouldn't deter Jack's resolve.

"I know. I just thought you should know. If there's a chance that he's still alive, you deserve to know."

Cradling her now throbbing head in her hands, Alana took a deep breath and leaned over the kitchen island.

"If you find him, don't bother trying to hold him again. Do us all a favor and *kill him* this time." Alana clicked the 'end call' button and dropped the phone on the island with a harsh clatter.

Will was still a jumble of emotions. Elated to have consummated his relationship with Hannibal in yet another crucial way and happy to be leaving behind a humid climate that didn't suit his disposition. Nervous about migrating to yet another country under yet another assumed identity and worried about getting caught in the process. Hannibal had succeeded in quelling the latter worry to a degree. They had left so quickly and cleanly without a trace linking them to their next destination. Prone to fretfulness as he was, Will believed in Hannibal and his scrupulous preparation above all else, and he tried to call upon this every time a ping of alarm sounded in the depths of his mind.

Being on the open water again helped too. It was a much less lengthy voyage than their escape from the States, but it was still a pleasant distraction that allowed Will to immerse himself in the sea breeze and the charting of courses, always enjoying the opportunity to be useful in this avenue. Hannibal's salacious gaze roaming up and down his body as he worked didn't hurt either.

They took Hamish's heart with them, Hannibal slicing it into pieces and dredging it in flour and herbs before searing the organ in butter over the small galley stove. He added potatoes,

carrots, onions, fresh thyme, garlic, and red wine to the pan and left it to simmer for an hour.

Will had been stressed about leaving in a suitable time frame, but it was accomplished with relative ease. Everything was arranged and ready in less than two days, and just like that, they were gone. No one to say goodbye to, no commitments to sever. Even though their fugitive status was responsible, something about the ease of picking up and leaving at any time without messy farewells was liberating to Will. He was a man who hadn't tied himself to much of anything in his life, and even when he had, it was always transient, the only exception being his dogs. He was tied to Hannibal, but there wasn't really a word for that very unique fusion. And it definitely didn't belong in the same categories as the typical tethering influences of employment and marriage. His union with Hannibal didn't signify limitation or obligation. Only freedom. From his old life, from societal taboos, from self-denial. From everything that had ever caged him. The value of this vastly outweighed the risk. Even as he fought trepidation over what would come next, he felt in his very marrow that he would have no regrets about his decisions if they were caught tomorrow. Still, he prayed they would have many years yet. No amount of time together would be enough.

The galley was lovely, and while Will adored the boat Hannibal had chosen for him, he mourned the loss of a proper dinner over a table that would have allowed Hannibal to flex his presentational muscles. Regardless, the meal was still attractive on the plate and beyond satisfying on the palate. The mood was deferential yet foreboding, so many elements mixing in the ambience of the night. Hannibal leaned more toward the former of course, much less inundated by future concerns than Will.

"I think you should feel triumphant. Consuming your slain enemy as you helm your own vessel on the ocean. Yet you seem lugubrious." Hannibal lowered his utensils to the plate and pinned Will with those intense, dark eyes.

"One minute I have complete confidence that we'll avoid capture. That you're too clever to be caught again, just like Bedelia said. And the next…" Will leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I'm consumed with fear, but I hesitate to broach the subject."

"Why?" Hannibal kept it simple for once.

"Because I don't want you to think life with me will be a continuous cycle of acceptance and then anxiety. I don't want you to think the seismic spikes that characterize my brain mean I regret even a second of our life together." He took a thoughtful bite of dinner and kept his eyes on the plate.

"Will, this is effectively your first kill on the run. Ending Hamish's life cemented, both in your mind and in the eyes of the law, your status as a fugitive killer. It would be childish for me to personalize your reaction to it. This is a new experience for you, and a stressful one for anyone. If you need to talk about it, you should feel free to do so without any concern that it may be misconstrued." Hannibal covered Will's hand with his own, thumb stroking the pulse point on his wrist.

"I don't want you to get caught," Will whispered. He tugged at the cuff of Hannibal's shirtsleeve with his free hand like a child begging for the attention of his mother. A

vulnerable gesture that instantaneously colored his cheeks pink. “I can’t be separated from you again.”

“You phrased it in the singular instead of the plural yet you express a fear of separation. You presume my fate would be worse than your own,” Hannibal stated factually.

“They know your crimes inside and out now. It’s been sensationalized for years, placed in the public consciousness through more insidious means than Freddie Lounds. If Jack were the one to find you…maybe he would be more forgiving. Or maybe more punitive. I’m not sure anymore. But I wouldn’t be surprised if you were shot on sight instead of brought in quietly. Anyone worth their salt knows better than to trust the security of any prison to hold you, and it’s not hard to imagine people rallying for your execution.” Will squeezed Hannibal’s hand.

“I agree, but they will not have that satisfaction.”

“But how do you *know* that?”

“I will not coddle you with false certainties. I am not omniscient, but you know I am in possession of a unique skillset that has allowed me to evade capture for longer than perhaps anyone. If you recall, I was never actually caught in the true definition of the word.” *Yes, no one needs to be reminded of that, Hannibal.* Hannibal angled his head, trying to meet Will’s eyes across the table. Will looked up enough to give him that. “You know I will do everything in my power to keep us together for as long as possible. Trust my competence.”

“I do.” Will kissed Hannibal’s knuckles and leaned back with a heavy sigh. “I’m starting to understand what you said about how terrifying it is to love someone so much.”

Hannibal smiled and cupped Will’s cheek with his palm.

“Are you sure it isn’t too soon to go to Europe?”

“Putting as much distance between us and our previous place of residence is the wisest choice. In the unlikely event that Mr. Ritchie’s death is linked to us, we will be on another continent with no indication of our chosen destination. We will also be able to keep abreast of any publicized hunt for us. We will always be several steps ahead.” Hannibal stood up from the chair and slid in next to Will on the upholstered bench. “I must say, I am very much looking forward to showing you Vouvant. I think the French countryside will agree with your temperament.”

Grant Carter met Jack at the airport with open arms, and they shared the warm, amiable embrace of old friends who can always pick up where they left off.

“You look like you’re ready to burn the world for pissing in your coffee,” the younger man joked as they hugged, “which is to say you haven’t changed a bit, Jack.”

“And you still think you’re one funny sonofabitch even though no one’s laughing but you.” They both broke out into hearty, sincere laughter and started off together toward the parking lot. “Can’t thank you enough for flying all the way here to help me out.”

“Eh, it’s no problem, really. Not like my job doesn’t already having me flying out at a moment’s notice. What was I gonna do? Miss a chance to help you find one of the world’s most notorious serial killers so I can swoop in at the last minute and take all the credit?” Grant smirked as he heaved Crawford’s bag into the trunk. He had a well-coiffed shock of salt and pepper hair and a healthy tan courtesy of his half Italian genes, casually clad in a blue v-neck and tan linen trousers.

“Did I mention that you’re still an annoying bastard?”

“Come on, you know the press will love this handsome, young English, Italian face more than yours. I’m a natural in front of the media circus.”

“You’re *six* years younger than me.” Jack opened the door and got in the passenger seat. “You sure this guy will give us access? This isn’t exactly according to procedure.”

“I understand Freddie Lounds has made your trust of journalists as thin as gravy skin, but this is *me* you’re talking to. Guillaume and I might not go back as far as a couple of old geezers like you and me,” A brief smile flitted across Jack’s face as he pictured the two of them as young men gallivanting around Italy not long before he caught his first glimpse of his Bella, long before Grant had hitched his post to journalism, “But he’s still a trustworthy friend who’s true to his word. Can’t imagine why you’d fly all the way here if you were unsure anyhow.”

Grant regarded Jack in his peripheral vision as he pulled out of the airport parking lot.

“Apparently, I’m willing to bet a lot on a hunch these days.” Jack sighed and watched the tropical scenery out the window as pavement faded into greenery. He couldn’t decide if he hoped to god he was wrong or hoped to god he was right.

They drove to Guillaume’s office in Abidjan right away. Jack refused Grant’s offer of a meal and some relaxation beforehand. Accustomed to Jack’s brusque demeanor and tendency to get to the heart of the matter, his friend only looked mildly rebuffed. After all, this wasn’t a leisure trip. The sooner he saw the evidence, the sooner his stomach could stop churning a toxic soup of apprehension. Or maybe the acid inside him would drill a hole straight through his abdomen. It largely depended on what he would find there.

Officers in the precinct cast inquisitive glances their way as a secretary ushered them to the office of the man they were scheduled to meet with.

“I’m getting the sense everyone here enjoys FBI interfering with their investigation as much as local police back home.” Jack smiled and extended a hand to shake.

Det. Guillaume Kassi chuckled and shook the offered hand. He was a slim, well-dressed man with caramel colored skin and shrewd brown eyes. He looked more like a young politician than a high ranking detective, but Jack knew the lines between the two had a way of overlapping often.

“Not everyone is happy about my decision to take Mr. Carter’s advice,” Guillaume gestured to Grant, “but fortunately it’s my choice to make so they will have to keep their heads down and bear it. The similarities were far too great. Before I contacted Grant, I wasn’t aware of Lecter’s case. News of fugitives across the ocean don’t always reach us unless there’s a relevant reason to suspect they’re headed our way. But once I learned of it, I was immersed in every document I could get my hands on. A once in a lifetime case, and you solved it and caught him.”

“As much as I’d love to agree, the particulars are a lot more complicated. Mostly, his greatest enemy…or best ally depending on who you ask, was responsible for solving it. And Lecter wasn’t caught. Not by me or anyone else. He gave himself up, willingly and quietly.” Jack looked at the Ivorian detective through heavy lidded eyes and jet lag tainted focus as he mentally plodded through the history of his relationship with Hannibal. Tired of it as he was, he couldn’t begin to imagine how much more exhausted Will was by the time he made it to that cliff, the heavy weight of the past and the present like a yoke around his slim neck. It’s what made it so tempting to believe the profiler had tossed both of them to their watery graves, but it’s also what made the option so untrustworthy. It seemed too clean, too abrupt, and too contradictory to the bits and pieces relayed to Crawford by the people in Will Graham’s life after the whole ordeal. Jack had never been able to read or predict Will the way Hannibal could so the picture forming in his head was still extremely murky and uncertain. However, it dragged its nagging claws across the center of his suspicions just enough to keep him searching for answers.

“The American papers paint a very different, tidier picture.” Guillaume crossed his arms and leaned against the desk behind him with a frown.

“The FBI has a reputation and image to protect like anyone else. Not exactly something I agree with, but I don’t have a lot of control over the story they feed to the media. My superiors and I…have always experienced a difference in opinion over how to handle the Lecter case. In many ways.” Jack wasn’t sure how to begin to recap this saga nor was he very patient about delaying his viewing of the case file.

“I assume that is why we were denied official cooperation, and you are here presently of your own accord?”

“That’s the gist of it, yes. With all due respect, I would like to proceed to the viewing of everything you’ve collected so far. I’m happy to answer any questions about my past experience with Lecter, but time is definitely of the essence here.” Jack smiled and tried to temper his impatience. He knew it was unorthodox and very accommodating of Detective Kassi to be consulting with him like this despite the absence of official FBI approval. Grant had a way of employing his charm and bargaining skills in such a manner that he was capable

of talking most people into almost anything. Fate orchestrating a path in which Jack had to use him to find Hannibal was a twisted thread of poetry in the universe.

“Mr. Carter told me you were a man who doesn’t like to waste time.” Detective Kassi smiled wryly before opening the door and gesturing for the two men to follow him. “So am I.”

He led them to a conference room with a large oval table around which the evidence was strewn. The photos Grant had covertly sent were small and not very high resolution. Here, Jack was able to look at full size glossy prints of the crime scene. His heart skipped like a broken record as he fingered the first picture. Memories of every Ripper display flowed over him, a menacing acid rain of remembrance that seeped into his every pore.

It aligned with his MO, but something was off about it. Something sloppier. Something new. A new killer searching for his inspiration, his brand, his signature. A copy of the Ripper’s work with a twist. Small touches but noticeable. The fact that the incision line was visible in the tableau without a purpose; it wasn’t worked into the scene in any specific way. The presentation seemed hurried, materials hastily gathered rather than meticulously selected over time. And while it had all the poetry and symbolism of Hannibal’s work, it was still simpler than his past creations. It couldn’t hold a candle to the complex precision of the Tree Man or his display of Beverly.

Jack wasn’t sure he would have noticed these details years ago. Perhaps Will’s empathic tricks had rubbed off on him. He could only hope so. God knows that was the kind of eye and imagination he needed right now.

“And no prints or DNA on the body?”

“Correct. Gloves were probably worn. Judging from the subtle marks on his forearms, he was most likely restrained when injected so no skin or hair under the nails during a struggle. I didn’t want to leak this to our mutual journalist friend until you had arrived, but there’s another reason this raised flags in relation to Hannibal Lecter.” Guillaume lowered his voice and shut the door to the conference room.

“Yes?” Jack looked up from the files, and his dark eyes narrowed.

“A couple weeks before he died, Mr. Ritchie rented a house a few miles from where his body was found. Apparently he stayed there a week or two every summer. Now houses are pretty far apart in Île Boulay, but the nearest ‘neighbors’ at the time of his rental were two men who had arrived in the country a few weeks before and left two days after Ritchie’s presumed time of death.” Guillaume walked over to Jack and leaned against the table, hands slipping into his trouser pockets. “Normally, that wouldn’t be a red flag since these are vacation homes and have a revolving door of residents. But then we looked into this particular pair a little further.”

“And let me guess, you can’t find anyone who saw them enough to give a reliable description and their identities are false names that lead to nowhere?”

The detective nodded solemnly.

“The man they rented the house from never met them. Everything was dealt with over the internet. The renter, I use the singular as only one person contacted him, was very specific about not wanting to meet. Keys were left on the porch in a potted orchid, the flower was his own requested method, the money paid exceeded the asking price…just a lot of odd particulars.”

“Hannibal Lecter specializes in odd particulars. Not like him to hide so much though. Guess he must have learned his lesson from the last time.” Jack turned and leaned against the table next to his new acquaintance. “Friends of the victim didn’t provide any leads?”

Guillaume shook his head with a regretful sigh.

“Hamish’s friends are…not the most savory characters. This annual vacation was less of a quiet getaway and more of a venue for him to throw a week long party. They remember vaguely hearing their friend mention the neighbors but nothing helpful. It appears they didn’t impart any details of their lives or work or much of anything to Mr. Ritchie. Or at least not anything he shared with anyone else. There is one young woman who saw one of them, but… she wasn’t exactly in the position to stick around for keen observation.” Guillaume shot Jack a look that said *“I hope you know what I mean because I don’t feel like talking about it.”*

“Jesus,” Jack sighed, fingers rubbing the temples that were threatening to throb. “Did you collect prints from the house?”

“Of course. And while they obviously didn’t flag anything in Ivorian databases, I’m hoping you can convince your colleagues to run them. I know it’s not a lot to go on, but – ”

“I’ll get it done.” Jack curtly interrupted.

“You seem awfully sure.” The detective eyed Crawford dubiously, arms coming to cross over his chest.

“I might not have the cooperation of Kade Prurnell, but there are a whole lot of people who have had their lives destroyed by Lecter. Some in smaller ways, like the shrapnel from an explosion shattering and slicing all over the damn place. Some in ways that hit a little harder than a stray bullet casing, but either way, they’ve been touched. Stained.” Jack gazed back at Kassi, pupils blown wide with fierce determination and a quiet rage. “I assure you I’ll get it done.”

“Hmm I’m thinking back to the *last* time we went against protocol to entrap Dr. Lecter.” Jimmy Price looked thoughtfully into the distance as though Jack were there to see his mocking display. Brian Zeller stood next to him, characteristically cheeky grin plastered on his face. They were standing around the pub table in Price’s kitchen working their way through a bottle of gin and a large pizza with gusto (Price had tried to cajole him into classing

up the night with a cheese and charcuterie platter, but Zeller glared at him until he relented: "Hey, I'm trading beer for gin. You can't ask any *more* of me.") since both of them were off the next day.

"Are you going to finish that thought or do you want me to call back later?" There wasn't an iota of patience to be found in Jack's words, and Jimmy grimaced a little. It was remarkable how Jack could manage to be authoritative and threatening from across the ocean with nothing but a harsh *tone*.

"Sorry, he was still thinking," Brian bent down and spoke into the phone lying on the pub table's surface. "Lotta highlights of carnage and emotional disrepair to sort through, you know? Disembowelings, broken spinal columns, your garden variety mutilation."

"And don't forget the defenestration." Jimmy cocked a finger in Brian's direction. "Alana was *so* overjoyed to be able to work that esoteric term into conversation. Almost made up for that contraption they had her body pinned together with."

"Like something straight out of *Brazil*."

"YES. Held together like a demented ferris wheel assembled by the town drunk. Gilliam should put it in his next movie. Give her royalties. Not that she needs them, of course." Jimmy tilted his head and half rolled his eyes at his friend.

"Will you shut up and listen for a minute?! It's not like I can actually see this little vaudevillian display from you two anyway so can we please – "

"Well, actually we *could* put you on – "

"ENOUGH," Jack interjected, his irritation level that of a curmudgeonly old man sentenced to the company of a particularly rambunctious group of kindergartners.

"Sorry, sir. Continue. It's all quiet on the western front here." Price sighed and flashed Zeller a *"why do we do this job again?"* pained look.

"I need you to do this. Yes, I realize everything and everyone was left in shambles the last time. I don't need you to *remind* me. That's precisely *why* I have to check on this. If it isn't him, then it isn't him. But I have to know, and it's not like something as small as running prints will raise any flags to Kade or anyone else. Even if the results are positive and someone notices, it's easy enough to run that mouth of yours until you come up with a convenient excuse. Maybe you're connecting an old cold case to the Ripper. Maybe there's an old piece of evidence from the closed cases that we overlooked. Maybe you're just running it for completion. *I don't care*. Just do it." The cadence of Jack's speech had all the finesse of a jackhammer at this point, and it was hard to argue with him once that level of intimidation was invoked.

The two forensic scientists exchanged exasperated looks. Zeller shrugged and mouthed "why not" before taking a big bite of pizza.

"Alright, how are you getting them here, Jack?" Price responded.

“Let me worry about that. Just look for a package to your attention at the bureau from me.” Jack tersely hung up the phone without so much as a “thank you.”

Jimmy grabbed the bottle of gin by the neck and turned it over in his hands.

“What’s the ratio of gin to vermouth in a martini again? I would normally do 2/1, but I’m thinking this night now calls for a 5/1.”

“Screw the martinis. What else do you have around here? We need shots.”

The young woman waiting tables was friendly and energetic. When she talked, there was a rhythmic bounce to the flow of her sentences. Jack hoped this meant she would be more inclined to cooperate but so far her amiability waned with every passing question.

“I already told them I don’t know anything. We see *a lot* of men passing through here, some regulars, some foreigners in for one evening. It’s a whirl of people drifting in and out all night long. I’m lucky if I remember my own name and face by the end of it.” She carefully balanced two tumblers and two martini glasses filled with neon colored, sickly sweet concoctions onto a serving tray and flounced away to deliver them to a nearby table. When she came back, her demeanor had soured. She ran a hand through her hair. “Really, I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“I just want you to look at a couple photos. I promise we’ll leave you be after that. I realize you already spoke with me, but Agent Crawford has some new information that I’d like him to run by everyone our department questioned in this case.” Detective Kassi stepped aside and gestured to Jack, giving him the floor.

Jack carefully placed a photo of Hannibal, pristine and refined in a suit, on the wooden bar separating the two of them. It was a photo from his days in Baltimore. The days before the air around their friendship had grown pungent with the odor of suspicion. Hannibal was smiling with his arm around Jack. Will was somewhere off frame refusing to be photographed as he often did. Such a strange relic of the past to hold between his fingers now. An empty, glossy piece of fabrication that didn’t tell the true story of their relationship in its pixels. Jack couldn’t even remember the occasion anymore. A birthday? Office Christmas party? Some mundane and routine celebration like that which now seemed trivial and inexplicable in the grand scheme of their story. It didn’t seem possible that moments like that had ever existed. That world was long gone. Buried into obscurity like a lost civilization we can only speculate about from fossils and cave drawings.

Ada picked up the photo, rubbed her thumb over the top left corner of the shiny paper, and discarded it almost immediately. The flicker of recognition was subtle but very much present, and Crawford had been at this too long to not detect it.

“Sorry, I’ve never seen him before.” Ada turned her back on him and busied herself with dirty glasses and countertops. Guillaume stepped forward from beside Jack, but a hand on his arm stilled him. Jack shook his head and tried to silently communicate. *Let me do this.*

“Ada, I understand that discretion is very important when you work at an establishment such as this,” Jack lowered his voice to a gentle, reassuring timbre.

“And what kind of ‘establishment’ is that, Agent Crawford?” The young woman whipped around to glare at him, drying a tall glass with a bar rag. She pursed her lips and straightened her shoulders, everything about her stance broadcasting *“I am not one to be trifled with. I don’t give a fuck who you are.”*

“I’m not passing judgment, Ms. Lazaro.” The agent raised his hands in surrender and mustered as much of a sympathetic gaze as he could, his impatience for extracting information vying for hegemony. He knew Hannibal could very well be far away from this continent by now, the distance between him and Cote D’Ivoire widening like a chasm growing more impossible to traverse with every passing second. “I’m just trying to convey that I understand your reluctance to identify a patron. I’m sure there are consequences to doing that, and you would rather avoid them. But this man isn’t just any criminal. He’s taken the lives of more than we may ever know. Some of those people were my friends and colleagues. Some of those friends weren’t robbed of their lives in a physical sense but in some deeper way I’m not even sure I could describe to you. He almost took mine too.”

“In the physical or metaphorical sense?” Ada put down the glass she was drying and crossed her arms.

“He tried both. I’d like to think he didn’t achieve either.” Jack paused and held her gaze before asking, “Have you heard of Hannibal Lecter?”

“The one who ate his victims?” Ada wrinkled her nose as though smelling something rotten. “Yeah, I have a cousin who lives in New York. She told me about it, but I’ve never seen a picture of him. She’s one of those true crime nuts. Loves to comb through every tiny gruesome detail. Not me. Life is disturbing enough without Googling things like that.”

Ada stared down at the photo on the bar before picking it up again.

“This is him?” Rubbing the back of her neck, she shook her head, eyes squinting in disbelief.

“Yes, that’s Hannibal Lecter. Do you recognize him?” Guillaume cautiously asked.

Jack took a slow, anxiety-quelling breath and awaited her response. He was experienced enough to know that pressing her or appearing too pushy would only result in withdrawal.

“Yes…yes, I do but…” She peered up at Agent Crawford with confused eyes.

“What is it?”

“In this part of town…you don’t always deal with the best cross-section of the male population. You develop a knack for snap judging someone’s character and what level of

threat they are. This man was the kindest, most gentlemanly guy I'd served in a long time." She eyed Crawford dubiously.

"I know…he can be…" Jack chewed his bottom lip and considered his words. "Hannibal has a penchant for politeness. His criteria for victims often revolves around how mannerly they were when he met them."

"So if I hadn't been friendly and charming, I could be dead and without my liver right now?!" Ada exclaimed. A couple barflys looked distressed so she lowered her voice before continuing. "Sorry, that just isn't the type of thing you want to hear before a busy Friday night shift."

"I know. Sorry to alarm you, but I guarantee he won't be back here. In fact, it's doubtful he's still in Africa which is why it's imperative that I trace his whereabouts from when you last saw him. Is there anything you can tell me about that night? Details you might remember? Who he was with, where he went after, anything he said?"

"Okay, okay, let me think…He was with another man. Boyfriend or husband I'm assuming from how they were with each other."

Jack paused and swallowed the twinge of anger tinged with disappointment that bubbled up in his dry throat. Pulling out another photo from inside his jacket pocket, this time a more formal picture (Will's ID image lifted from the FBI database), he laid it down on the bar and watched Ada closely.

"Is this the man you saw with him?"

She plucked the photo between two fingers and regarded it before nodding emphatically.

"That's him. More of a beard, longer hair, no glasses, but yeah. Definitely. Who is he?"

"Will Graham. Someone Hannibal…has a complicated relationship with. You mentioned that you thought they were romantically involved. What made you so sure?" Jack tried to contain the skepticism in his tone. Skepticism tended to color Jack's voice with a resonance that wasn't far off from the pitch of his anger.

"Well…it's probably not something you want me to repeat although I have no qualms about that if you *really* want to hear it. I hear worse on a daily basis so I'm not squeamish." Ada leaned in and spoke conspiratorially.

"Let's just say that this one," She pointed to Will's photo, "went into an unmistakable amount of detail about a certain activity he enjoys with this one," and then to Hannibal's.

Jack ran a hand down his face and shook his head.

"Talk me through their visit to this place. *Everything* you remember. Please."

“Good…err, both good and bad news depending on how you look at it, I guess. But we ran the prints! And it is indeed a positive for Hannibal Lecter, but it’s *also* – ”

“Doesn’t matter anymore,” Jack cut off Jimmy Price gruffly as he exited the bar with Guillaume.

“Wow, okay. I understand that ‘thank you’ isn’t exactly a phrase found in surplus in your vocab, Jack. But I did go a bit out on a limb here and – ”

“I’m sorry. I’m grateful that you did this, Jimmy.” Jack smiled faintly and took in the surrounding atmosphere of brothels and bars, all preparing for the prime time weekend hours. “But I already found a witness to identify him. He was definitely here. However, the prints do confirm where he was living so I appreciate that.”

“Thank you, Jack. You’re very welcome, but there’s one more thing about the prints. I pulled off an additional set that pinged – ”

“Will Graham’s. I know.”

“Well hell, what *don’t* you know?” Jimmy put his hand on his hip and waved to Zeller as he entered the lab. He mouthed “it’s Jack.”

“Where he is *now*. And I’m pretty damn unsure how I’m going to find out that part, but this is a start. Hey, Price?”

“Yeah?” Zeller leaned in. Price took the cue and bent toward him so they could both hear.

“Did you ever…suspect anything was going on between Will and Hannibal?” Jack’s pulse quickened in his chest. He wasn’t sure how to ask this or if Price would think it was a ridiculous assertion.

The two men listening in Baltimore exchanged quizzical frowns.

“You mean other than high stakes manipulation, murder, mind games, betrayal, allegiance, betrayal again, covert operations of – ”

“That’s not what I mean. I just…never mind. I don’t know that it makes much difference anyway. It was just a surprise to me, and I suppose I wondered whether or not it would be to anyone else.” Jack sighed and leaned his forehead against the heel of his hand.

“Surprise? What happened?”

“The woman I interviewed today, the one who identified them, said it was obvious from her meeting with the two of them that they were…romantically involved.”

“Oooohhh, *that’s* what you mean.” Zeller put his hand over his mouth and pointedly excitedly at his friend. After he started dancing around the lab and mouthing “I knew it! I knew it,” Jimmy waved him away and covered the phone with one hand.

“No, *I* knew it. I’ve been saying this since Dr. Thirsty brought him chicken soup made from 3,000 year old Chinese berries or whatever not to mention that he carved a man into a literal heart shape – ”

“Price!”

“Sorry, Jack. Zeller just came in so I was updating him on the, uh, development.” Jimmy brought the phone back up to his ear and glared at Brian who mouthed “what?” with an innocent shrug.

“Please do not *share this information* with anyone. I haven’t talked to Kade yet, and I’m trying to gather as much evidence as I can before I do. We don’t need anyone panicking. Am I clear?” Jack bellowed into the phone. The last thing he needed was for Lounds to get a hold of this and leave him a trail of sensationalism and an enraged employer to come home to.

“Yes, sir. We won’t say anything. You don’t have to worry, and as for your question, it doesn’t surprise me. I wouldn’t say the good doctor and the empath were between the sheets *before* their daring escape. Graham is too…lifelong hetero, and that’s without mentioning all the roadblocks Lecter put up along the way that would have given him hesitation. *However*, Hannibal has been looking at him like a porterhouse steak since day one. Now, we all know that can mean something a little different for the wily psychiatrist than the rest of us. That said…in this case, it skyrocketed from arguable to so obvious it should have been a flashing ad in Times Square. He definitely wanted, forgive my phrasing here, but to *consume* Will in other less macabre ways.” Price winked at Zeller, and Brian responded with an enthused thumbs up.

“Damn…I don’t know what it says about me as a detective that this never occurred to me on even a fleeting level.” Crawford sat down on one of the metal chairs outside the bar and shot Detective Kassi an apologetic smile. Kassi smiled and nodded back.

“Honestly sir, it just says that you’re a heterosexual man.” Jimmy winced, not sure if a remark like that was okay. Jack didn’t have the biggest sense of humor about himself, particularly during tense times like this. Zeller walked away with his hand clamped down over his mouth to muffle the laughter.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Jack admitted with a chuckle. “Well, I’ll let you know if anything else turns up. Take care, Jimmy.”

“You too, Jack. Be careful.”

Chapter End Notes

A perpetual thank you to @castellomargot for editing and giving me fresh eyes on this very important chapter!

Comments give me life, and I'm kind of dying to know what everyone thinks of this turn in the plot so please tell me your thoughts!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> We're almost done folks. I've written first drafts of the next two chapters, and I need only one MAYBE two more after that to tie it all together. So this was our last chance for a big smut chapter before the end of the fic, and I really, really wanted to revisit the D/s dynamic with these two. *hides face* Don't throw tomatoes at me! Also, I know this chapter is hella big, but ugh...there really wasn't a nice breaking off point in the middle so enjoy. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vouvant was picturesque, all verdant land and ancient, stunning architecture that Will fell in love with at once. Hannibal's house was the perfect melding of old and new. The stone façade was accented with cerise shutters and a shingled roof the color of dusty clay while the interior was much less rustic albeit equally striking. The ceilings were higher than the exterior suggested, and the decorating scheme seemed to tell a story of the many versions of Hannibal that had existed over the years, both in reality and in the consciousness of others. There were features indicative of the aesthetic of his former Baltimore home: that odd mix of classic, sophisticated touches intermingled with gothic elements that hinted at his extracurricular activities, daringly laughing at the unwitting viewer's expense. Hannibal loved few things more than a private joke sailing over the heads of the company he perpetually toyed with. All the better to do it in an effortless way that served to not only mock their ignorance but also satisfy his desire to be surrounded by the best and most beautiful objects. Skeleton motifs could be easily explained away by Hannibal giving a characteristic musing on his fascination with life and death, leaving the spectator enthralled and impressed by his intellect rather than suspicious of any hidden meaning behind his tastes.

Lighter, more whimsical aspects that evoked a more relaxed atmosphere (although still always a curated one) were also present. A dark red sofa with a scalloped back that would have been at home in their Deco vacation house sat in front of the fireplace in the living room. A series of framed original *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations hung above the hearth, and Will was reminded of the *Leda and the Swan* print in Hannibal's Baltimore dining room.

Will walked into the dining room, stretched an arm up to reach the multi-tiered antler chandelier hanging above the dining table, and swiped a forefinger down one of the sanded-smooth bones. He smiled and ambled over to where Hannibal was busying himself with the thorough wiping of every surface in the living room.

"I like it here already," Will said as he bent down to scratch Winston's head.

"I thought you would. Sadly, everything is covered in a layer of dust due to neglect. Nothing appears to be damaged, but the smell is beyond abhorrent. We will have to open every

window and set about restoring the air to a breathable state." Hannibal glided a hand across the coffee table surface and glared at the offending dust on his fingertips. "I did not have a caretaker on retainer."

"It's not that bad." Will turned around to hide the smile Hannibal's fussiness brought to his lips.

When he turned back around, Hannibal was looking at him as though he had better choose his words very carefully. Will raised a conceding palm.

"Okay, I'll help you. I'm sure we can return it to its former glory."

A couple of hours later, they collapsed on the living room couch, late afternoon light and balmy air streaming in through the windows to refresh the stale atmosphere of the long vacant house. Although Will was rather exhausted from the travel combined with the elbow grease of cleaning the house, there was a restlessness infiltrating his mind and body. The question of "what now" was dancing across his skin, slow but persistent like the drip of a faucet that keeps you perched on the edge of sleep, not disruptive enough to fully rouse you but unrelenting enough to bar you from drifting into true rest.

Up to now, their plans had mostly consisted of the immediate. Step two and how to bridge the distance from step one to step two, but nothing about step five or six or ten. For all his meticulous planning and ability to account for possible hurdles and hindrances, Hannibal was a man who ultimately liked to live in the moment. He always cautioned Will against driving himself crazy with "what ifs" about things that were beyond his control and could not be predicted. He wasn't a proponent of allowing oneself to swell up with anxiety over what would happen six months from now. There was much value in this outlook, and Will had definitely benefitted from being presented with it throughout their relationship.

However, there was a time for allowing the chips to fall where they may and a time for discussing the various patterns in which the chips may scatter should someone come along to blow them to smithereens. Will leaned his elbow against the back of the couch and rested his chin in the heel of his hand, body turned toward Hannibal. Hannibal was facing forward, neck cradled by the plush fabric, eyes closed, hands neatly folded over his stomach. He looked too placid to disturb so Will got up to go find another corner of the house where he could be alone with his thoughts. A hand gently caught him by the wrist as he walked by.

"Are you alright, Will?" Hannibal slowly opened his auburn eyes and tilted his head in Will's direction.

"Yeah…I think I'm just tired. I'm going to find the bedroom and take a nap. Want to join me?"

"Perhaps in a bit. I would like to do a little more work down here first. Let me help you strip the bed. I shudder to think what has accumulated on the duvet – " Hannibal started to rise, but Will stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"It's fine. I'm sure I can find everything. Your propensity for order has its perks." Will smiled and headed up the wooden staircase, Winston trailing behind him.

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When Hannibal opened the door to the bedroom an hour later, he found Will curled up with Winston on the floor, idly combing his hand through the dog's fur and not raising his head to acknowledge Hannibal's presence. The curtains were drawn, only a slim line of fading early evening sunlight extending from the right edge of the curtain onto the wooden floor.

"Has 'I'm taking a nap' become code for 'I am retreating to a dark room to brood in silence'?" Hannibal leaned against the door frame, hands in his pockets.

"I tried, but I've never been very good at short stints of sleep." Will sat up but didn't get up from the floor. "Once I finally start to drift off…*if* I'm that lucky…the recommended duration of a nap has already passed so I'm left irked that I wasted two hours of my life."

"Why are you on the floor?" Hannibal's soft eyes suggested that he knew this was a relapse into old behavior.

Will just shrugged and stroked Winston's belly.

"I know you don't like him sleeping on the bed."

"While it may not be preferable, if the result of that rule is you sleeping on the floor like an orphan, I will gladly make an allowance." Hannibal strode over to the bed and sat down. "Would you kindly rise from there and join me?"

Will nodded and got up, trying to hide the wince that flickered across his face as his joints popped and cracked. He sat next to Hannibal and leaned back until he was supine. Hannibal followed suit, curled his arm around Will's waist, and pulled him closer until he was pressed flush against the other man's side.

"Why are you withdrawing, darling?" Hannibal gently asked with a kiss to Will's temple.

"I don't know…I needed to think for a while. I'm sorry. Molly used to call it – " Will caught himself but not in enough time, and he sucked in a sharp, regretful breath.

"Obviously, I am not fond of the fact that she was a presence in your life, but I do not plan to punish you for merely mentioning her name, Will. Especially when it is pertinent to the matter at hand." Hannibal kissed his neck, and Will couldn't help the relieved sigh that escaped his mouth.

"She used to say I was in 'Shaolin Seclusion,' locked away like a monk on the mountainside. She would make cracks about it like that…try to laugh me out of it," Will hesitantly admitted.

"Was she successful?" Will thankfully heard no hint of disdain in Hannibal's voice.

“Sometimes…depended on the severity of my mood and how devoted I was to isolation. The thing about introversion on my level is that you can survive without speaking a lot longer than most.” Will turned on his side and ran a hand through Hannibal’s hair.

Hannibal wet his lips and downturned his eyes just a fraction, shoulders marginally tense.

“Hey,” Will softly kissed his lips, “I don’t feel like withdrawing when I’m with you. Not really. Sometimes I need to separate so I can gather my thoughts and organize the disorder of my brain, but that’s all it is. You don’t make me feel overloaded or suffocated.”

Hannibal smiled faintly and stroked Will’s cheek.

“Normally I would not put too much stock into the behavior as I know it is your nature. However – ”

“The timing makes it more concerning. I understand.”

Hannibal nodded and kissed Will’s forehead.

“So how much of that time did you spend debating how long you had to wait before coming up here?”

“I believe there were at least five minutes devoted to the planning of dinner.”

Will chuckled and hugged him closer.

“Such admirable restraint. And what did you decide?”

“Coq au vin. The weather is perhaps a bit warm for it, but classic French comfort food seems appropriate for our first night.”

“Sounds perfect.” Will brushed his lips against Hannibal’s ear, tongue darting out for a second to trace a circle around the earlobe. Hannibal groaned quietly and tightened his grip on Will’s waist.

“Would you like to share the details of the mental puzzle you were unraveling in this last hour?”

“Not much of a puzzle. Just…I like being able to pick up and leave whenever we want, and I’m excited to explore the world with you. As you know, I haven’t done much globetrotting in my life.” Will pulled back to meet Hannibal’s eyes.

“I have the distinct impression that there is a proviso about to be unveiled.” Hannibal’s expression was kind and encouraging so Will pushed forward.

“Yes, in a way. I suppose I’m curious if it will *always* be like this but don’t want to make it seem like I’m impatient or feeling unstable because of current circumstances.”

“You would simply prefer an end destination. Comfort in knowing what is on the long term horizon,” Hannibal expressed sympathetically.

“Yeah, I’d like to settle with you somewhere eventually. I know it be could quite a while before that becomes a possibility, but it’s something I want…if you’re open to that. I know it’s an awfully run-of-the-mill request,” Will laughed softly and kissed Hannibal’s palm.

“I am very much amenable to the idea. Have any particular options struck you as feasible?” Hannibal slipped his hand under Will’s shirt, caressing the small of his back.

“I don’t know…somewhere with land. Rural but not so isolated that we can’t readily access anything we need. I like the Mediterranean climate, but I think it’s too precarious to stay here. Maybe somewhere a little deeper into Europe.”

“I am sure we can come to an agreement. Your stipulations are quite broad.”

“Well, I don’t care as much about the location as I do about the company.” Will smiled, and Hannibal broadly smiled back.

“Will you be alright if I take care of a few errands in the village? It shouldn’t take more than an hour or two. The gap of maintenance for this residence has left a few loose ends I would like to begin rectifying as soon as possible.”

“You sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“No, it would be tedious for you. Get some rest, chéri. Whether it be slumber or purely lying down in contemplation,” Hannibal teased. “I will prepare dinner when I return.”

The next day, well rested with land-legs fully regained, they were seated side by side in the ample backyard that expanded into forest, leisurely sipping coffee as Winston ran around. Will felt the unmistakable sensation of eyes on him and redirected his gaze from the spacious greenery to Hannibal. His lips quirked up in a curious half smile, eyes observant but not so intent as to make Will uneasy.

“Enjoying the view?” Will smiled leisurely and stretched out, free arm slipping between his head and the back of the chair.

Hannibal’s smile widened a fraction, and he turned his attention back to the scenery in front of him.

“Do you find that your mind has quieted since last night?”

“Yeah, the setting has definitely helped. I’m still fighting flare-ups, but I’m adjusting. If there’s anything I know how to deal with, it’s my own tortured mind,” Will quipped before taking a sip of coffee and placing the mug on the black wrought iron table between them.

“Might you be interested in employing other methods to further still the cerebral waters?” Hannibal’s expression turned salacious, eyes warm and sparkling in the sunlight.

“What is it you’re asking for, Dr. Lecter?” Will practically purred, tongue peeking out between his red lips.

“Due to the rapid progression of events, there has not been time to enact previously discussed techniques of submission and dominance. In the present comfort of our new surroundings, I thought we might remedy that.” Hannibal crossed his legs and patiently waited for Will’s verdict.

“I think that’s an excellent idea. Should we start now?” Will didn’t bother trying to contain his glee.

Hannibal consulted his watch. Something about the fact that he still wore a wristwatch despite smartphones having rendered them largely obsolete always charmed Will.

“It’s almost time for lunch. Go inside and remove all of your clothes except for your underwear. You will find a hamper in the walk-in closet. Please discard your clothes in there. Do not leave them strewn about the bedroom floor. Then come downstairs and remain seated on the living room couch, palms on your thighs, until I provide you with further instruction. Do you require clarification on any of this?” Hannibal regarded Will coolly, mask of control firmly in place.

“No, Dr. Lecter. I understand.” Will’s heart skipped in his chest as he got up and walked back into the house. It hadn’t been *that* long since they had engaged in these games, but Will positively ached for it. And Hannibal was right. It was just what he needed to coax his thoughts into a relaxed, flowing stream instead of the rollicking, stormy sea they were still teetering on the edge of. He’d also been eager to re-enter this realm of their sexual relationship ever since their dinner conversation in Abidjan, to bend to Hannibal’s will and feel that delicious pull at the edge of his limitations.

As Will undressed, he paused after removing his t-shirt, hand gathering the fabric in consideration before neatly depositing it on the floor, an unambiguous message of rebellion. Will grinned as he shed the rest of his garments and purposely placed them in the hamper.

Walking down the stairs, he didn’t feel too self-conscious. He was accustomed to walking around in his underwear in the houses he had shared with Hannibal thus far. It wasn’t until he sat down and obediently placed his hands, palms down, on the tops of his legs that he began to feel exposed. Exposure was always less about nudity and more about a grander, all-encompassing position of vulnerability in these situations, a willingness to submit to Hannibal’s requests without question and allow him a vantage point into Will’s desires that no one else had. Sitting there patiently without knowledge of when it would end was definitely something Will would never have felt comfortable experiencing with anyone else nor would it have occurred to him as an option.

About ten minutes later, the tension in his arms from the fixed position began to radiate through his muscles. Not unbearable yet. Just enough of a sensation to function as a constant reminder of his task and why he was here. His mind gradually emptied itself of all other

concerns, Will's thoughts replaced with Hannibal. *All Hannibal*. When would he come back inside, and what would happen once he did? How would he punish Will for the intentional sin of the discarded shirt on the floor? Would he ask Will to do anything else or simply make him endure this interminable test of tolerance? Will slowly rolled his shoulders, all the while careful not to upset the position of his hands. Suddenly, he heard the back door open and a momentary, welcome breeze wafted over his naked skin. He couldn't see into the kitchen from where he sat. Not without disobeying Hannibal's orders. The sounds of food preparation filled Will's ears as he strained his neck for a peek. It made little difference. The distance between the doorway and the middle of the couch was far too great for any amount of stretching to afford him a glimpse.

Eventually, the strange symphony of cooking noises, the crackle and pop of butter over medium heat, the sizzle of unknown culinary fare hitting the hot pan to sauté, the tap and scrape of the spatula on the skillet, lulled Will into a kind of meditation. He focused on every small sound, closing his eyes and trying to ascertain their origin as they floated into range, lifting his head and inhaling each identifying smell as it reached his nose. Trying to parse each individual ingredient with the accuracy Hannibal possessed required significant concentration, and his thoughts migrated from any lingering speculation about Hannibal's agenda for the afternoon and remained fixed on the surrounding sensory information instead. Aromas of eggs, mushrooms, onions, and something similar to bacon made themselves known. When he tried to focus more acutely, he picked up on an herb or two. Thyme? Rosemary? He wasn't certain.

Suddenly, the sizzling ceased and was replaced by the audible clink of spatula meeting plate. This broke Will's trance and flooded his mind once again with thoughts of what would happen next. Did Hannibal intend to call him to the dining room like this? He couldn't picture a man so focused on table manners permitting him to sit at the dining table like this, but then again, the older man allowed quite a bit more the night they dined on Will's spleen. Smiling at the memory, Will's fingers twitched restlessly on his thighs, neglected cock hardening in his boxers.

Footsteps began to echo across the kitchen tile, and Will's eyes shot open, wide and observant. Hannibal came into view, apron tied about the waist, sleeves of his white button-down rolled up to the elbows, and smiled warmly at the younger man when he saw that he was still dutifully sitting on the couch with palms in place.

"You may move now, if you like. Arrange yourself in the position you find most comfortable. I will return with your lunch momentarily."

"In here?" Will expressed with a note of surprise, gesturing to the furniture around him.

"Yes. In here," Hannibal stated casually before disappearing back into the kitchen.

When he returned, the apron was gone and a plate was balanced in his palm, silverware neatly laid on the edge. Will rearranged his body so that his back rested in the left corner of the couch, legs crossed and arms folded over his stomach.

A befuddled Will opened his mouth to ask what the hell was going on but closed it as he remembered it wasn't his place to question anything right now. Not while the game had only

just begun.

Hannibal put the plate down on the coffee table, and Will eyed it eagerly. They hadn't really eaten breakfast, sleeping too late as they recovered from the trip. It had made more sense to wait until lunchtime, but now that he was confronted with a mouth-watering, fragrant omelet, Will became sharply aware of the groans reverberating from the pit of his stomach. Reaching for the food would be a mistake though. That he knew for sure. So he patiently sat in silence as Hannibal ducked into the dining room to retrieve a chair which he planted in front of Will.

"An omelet with fresh thyme, tarragon, shallots, mushrooms, pancetta, and goat cheese. An apology for our missed breakfast this morning." Hannibal smiled and plucked the plate from the table before severing a small bite with his fork and raising it to Will's lips.

Will hesitated before leaning forward and delicately closing his mouth around the fork, humming in pleasure as the flavors infiltrated every corner of his senses. Hannibal layered more of the dish on the fork and looked to Will for approval before continuing. The younger man swallowed and nodded, blushing a little as he opened his mouth once again. He didn't know what to make of his partner's proclivity for feeding him. It was sweet, it was strange, and it hearkened back to more turbulent times in the relationship. It was odd how such a small gesture was loaded to the brim with meaning. This was the first time Hannibal didn't have a convenient excuse for it though. Post-surgery was one thing. This was something else entirely.

"I didn't expect my submission to consist of being handfed."

"You have always been a fiercely autonomous entity. Your self-reliance is a point of pride for you and one to which you have clung quite stringently in adulthood. Allowing me a luxury such as this is submissive indeed. Compromising where your independence is concerned is no insignificant occurrence although I suppose you allowed Jack to coerce you into forms of it many times. I expected more protest today." Hannibal fed Will another bite and handed him a glass of water. Will took a couple sips and handed it back.

"It's a little infantilizing, but we've talked about it so I'm already aware it's something you enjoy…and I want to please you…" Will's cheeks turned pink, and he averted his eyes. "Especially when we're like this." *Answered my own damn question apparently.*

"Still, I would hate to think I had driven all the obstinacy from your disposition." Hannibal grinned slyly and laid the fork across the now empty plate.

"You know hell will freeze over before that happens, Dr. Lecter," Will said, voice sultry as he pictured the shirt brazenly thrown on the floor upstairs.

Hannibal gave Will a satisfied smile and cleared the dishes before rejoining him in the living room. He remained standing, arms linked behind his back as he gazed down at Will. Will searched his expression for a hint about what was in store but found none.

"Shall we go upstairs and see if you followed instructions?"

“After you, Dr. Lecter.” Will’s words were slow and deliberate, a slight challenge hidden in their cadence as he stared back at him.

“Very well. You may follow me to the bedroom.”

Will’s pulse thudded as he trailed behind Hannibal, titillated both by the idea of him discovering the evidence of his blatant defiance and by watching his fine form walking up the stairs, muscles outlined by his tailored clothes.

When they reached the landing and turned toward the master bedroom on the left, Hannibal stopped short. The rumpled shirt was visible from the doorway. Calmly and purposefully, he walked into the room and circled the item like a shark, hands linked behind his back as he looked down at it.

“My directive was clear and simple. Therefore one must conclude that this display of yours was intentional. There was no room for misinterpretation of what I asked of you.” Hannibal’s head snapped up to spear Will with icy eyes that made the younger man’s blood surge hotly through his veins.

Will took a breath and swallowed before answering.

“Yes. I did it on purpose.”

Hannibal tilted his head, eyes narrowing slightly before closing the distance between them. Will was still lingering near the doorway, having only taken a couple steps into the room.

“This qualifies as flagrant disrespect, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter. I was curious what would happen.” Will’s breath caught in his throat as he watched Hannibal’s expression shift. Equal parts lustful and predacious.

“You baited me to the end of discovering what punishment would fit the crime,” Hannibal nonchalantly stated. “Remove your underwear and lie on your stomach on the bed. Turn your head away from the door and do not attempt to seek me out in your line of vision. Stretch your arms upward until your palms meet the headboard.”

Will complied and closed his eyes in an effort to discourage himself from searching for Hannibal in his periphery. Smooth fabric grazed his wrist, and Will’s breath sped up as he felt it curl and tighten around his wrist. Hannibal gently pulled his arm until it was closer to the bedpost. He tied the silk around the post and walked to the foot of the bed. Will heard him pause, felt his eyes boring down, surveying his canvas.

“Turn your head back to the doorway.”

After Will obeyed, Hannibal walked around to the other side of the bed and set about the task of tying the other wrist.

“Can you be trusted not to turn your head?” Hannibal asked. Not waiting for a reply, he declared, “No, I think your earlier behavior suggests you would not be able to help yourself.”

Hannibal withdrew from the bed, and Will heard the opening of a drawer and the rustling of fabric. A few seconds later, a smooth cloth was slipped over his eyes. He sighed, strangely happy to have the burden of sight lifted from this equation. Hands stroked down the length of his arms, tugging lightly at each restraint to test the strength of the knot. Hannibal's lips brushed the edge of Will's ear as his smoky voice sounded in the quiet room.

"Have you been thinking about this all through lunch? Summoning your evocative imagination to concoct fantasies of what I might do?"

Will involuntarily thrust against the cool sheets, cock hardening from the rumble of Hannibal's husky, sensual tone and the compelling sway of anticipation. Will felt the mattress shift under Hannibal's weight as he sat next to his tethered body and gripped Will's hips to still any movement.

"I would rather not restrain your lower body as it impedes my ability to position you however I like, but I *will* bind you if you continue to seek gratification without permission. Shamelessly thrusting against the bed like a clumsy teenager driven by hormones. What if someone saw you like this? What would they make of your desperation, I wonder?" Hannibal released his hold on Will's hips and traced a finger over the curve of his ass. He shivered at the touch and wondered if his lover was smirking, complacent with how sensitive Will was to the minutest of touches from Hannibal. Only Hannibal.

"I-it's the most mortifying thing I can think of." Will's scarlet flush spread from his cheeks down his neck.

"Really? I highly doubt that. A mind as dazzlingly ablaze as yours? Limitless and sharpened to the fine edge of a new blade?" The mattress lifted slightly as Hannibal rose. Will listened to his light footsteps, trying to determine the route they were taking. When he spoke again, it was clear he was standing at the foot of the bed, no doubt surveying Will's body and delighting in the display. "No rebuttal, Agent Graham?"

Will remained silent. The thought of delving into his own consciousness to pluck the darkest, most humiliating fantasy he could find, plumbing the depths like a deep sea diver confronted with nature's most hidden and horrifying creatures, beings that seemed to be conjured from nightmarish fairytales and dreamscapes, well protected by the starkest blackness and unforgiving temperatures as though we weren't meant to see them, was too much to bear. He figured Hannibal would find a method of forcing it out anyway, excavating the caverns of his mind the way he might extract living tissue with precise surgical instruments, biding his time and infiltrating with careful fingers as only he could.

"I am confident I could devise escalated scenarios that would surpass the embarrassment of being seen for the unabashedly wanton man you are. You might maintain some level of control over the manner in which this is accomplished if you are willing to be honest." Hannibal walked back around the bed and sat down, leaning in until Will could feel the hot rush of breath against his ear. "But if you choose to remain taciturn, I will take that as unspoken approval for me to proceed as I wish."

A sigh of relief escaped Will's lips before he could think better of it.

“I would not exhale quite so comfortably if I were you. I never expressed my approval of your choice.”

The muscles of Will’s arms and legs flexed, and he could nearly hear the smug look on Hannibal’s face.

“I should know by now that you wouldn’t let me off that easy,” Will quietly responded.

“Yes. You should.” The heat of his body diminished from Will’s orbit as Hannibal once again put a few feet of distance between them. “Tell me what form you were hoping my punishment would take.”

You bastard, you stepped away so I couldn’t whisper. You’re going to make me fill this room with my confessions. You’ll probably make me fucking yell it in lurid detail until concerned neighbors come knocking on the door. At least you wouldn’t let them…oh god, you wouldn’t REALLY let anyone see me like this, would you?!

Will couldn’t picture Hannibal allowing anyone to see him tied up and vulnerable. Hannibal was far too fond of the fact that this side of Will was a gift only bestowed onto him. Surely he wouldn’t let anyone else sully the sanctity of this. But still Hannibal’s audacious warnings of how he could invent new situations to test his boundaries loomed ominously above Will’s head.

“I don’t know,” Will muttered.

“We both know that is not the case.”

Even though Will couldn’t see him, he felt Hannibal’s domineering presence so acutely. Could picture the ferocity of his eyes, could see him standing tall and unwavering, contained and unflustered as he dismantled the composure of his partner, content to draw his plan out as torturously long as was necessary until Will was sobbing and begging. And as frustrated as he was, Will wanted it too. Wanted it so badly because he needed the respite from himself, needed Hannibal to drive the charivari from his thoughts until only clarity remained. A brief smile flickered across Will’s face. It was funny, all things considered. *Every moment of cogent thought under your psychiatric care is a personal victory.* He remembered the seething notes of the syllables as he had said them, the quiet, simmering rage. Who would have guessed this is how Will would end up? *Hannibal. Hannibal would have guessed. Did guess. Infuriatingly right as usual.*

“What do you think I wanted?” Will challenged, Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat as he swallowed.

The sting of Hannibal’s palm on his naked thigh sucked the wind from the younger man’s lungs. True to form, Hannibal had moved with enough stealth that Will didn’t even know he was on the side of the bed again.

“Deflection will only worsen your fate. I will give you one more chance to be honest with me.” Hannibal warmed the skin he had struck, massaging in circles before coming down hard once again. Will gasped and bucked up from the bed, arousal curling low in his belly.

"*That*…" Will sighed like the weight of his mental burden had been lifted just a few inches.

"In that specific location or elsewhere?" Hannibal sounded almost indifferent, objective.

"Yes, there…and my ass….while I'm like this or maybe…" Will chewed on his bottom lip as he considered what it was he wanted, "maybe not tied *to* anything but tied together in a way where I can't move my limbs much."

"Did you imagine I would bend you over my knee? Over one of the many flat surfaces in the house perhaps? Or maybe bind you to a tree in the woods behind the house, exposed to any hunter or villager out for a stroll who might unexpectedly happen upon us, deprived of your sight so that you may not be aware of their presence? Every crunch of a twig underfoot would have you clenching as I colored your skin red with my hands, wondering if it's only a wild animal or if you have been seen by a stranger."

Will squirmed and moaned softly, his cheeks on fire as he visualized what Hannibal described in that melodious drawl of his.

"Jesus, H-Dr. Lecter…I don't know…I didn't think about it in that concrete – " His thigh was burning once again as Hannibal's hand landed on the sensitive flesh twice. A pleasant tingling sensation erupted on his skin like an aftershock of the blows, hardening his cock and quickening his pulse. "I-I guess over your lap. Or the edge of the bed, but mostly your lap."

I feel safe and secure there. The thought startled Will, the way it floated up intrinsically and with such lucidity. He thought of Hannibal's warm legs underneath him, Will's wrists tied together and calves bent and bound to the backs of his thighs, a steady hand on his back anchoring him as a strong palm connected with the supple flesh of his ass again and again and realized that yes, that was what he wanted. *Needed*.

Light flooded his pupils as the mask came off. Blinking in incomprehension, Will watched Hannibal methodically untie him, loops of fabric unfurling, black on black, until both wrists were free.

"What are you doing?" Will cautiously inquired.

Hannibal didn't answer. He only turned his eyes to Will with an unreadable expression and issued a command.

"Sit on the edge of the bed and raise your arms above your head, palms clasped together."

Will got into position, feeling like a martyr posed in contrition before him, eyes downcast and body offered with complete trust.

"I had hoped to procure bonds more suited to the task before this situation arose, but with a little ingenuity, this will be suitable for now." With one of the smooth lengths of fabric, Hannibal bound his wrists together, lacing the silk in figure eights from left wrist to right before looping around them both several times and finishing with a secure knot.

“Good boy,” Hannibal whispered, the curve of his mouth meeting Will’s temple in the most achingly light caress. Will’s head swayed back, dizzy from the shift in circulation caused by the pressure of the silk and the thrill of Hannibal’s dominance spreading like an uncharted sea before him. “Now lie on your back, feet planted on the bed.”

Hannibal repeated his ministrations except this time he joined thigh to calf. All the while, he maintained his focus on the act of binding Will, folding his body into itself in a position that was oddly pious, concentration written in his sharp eyes and the soft creases in his forehead. Who was the god Will served at this moment? Hannibal? Or their union? His own freedom? The freedom to be this uninhibited and to usher in every boundary-breaking yearning without question as he never had before? There was so much overlap in all of these gifts that it was hard to distinguish with clean, rigorous lines. The two of them and their passions lay overtop one another like an impenetrable thicket, roots interwoven to build a high-arching wall that was a barrier to all who threatened their peace. Will felt the fabric tug at his skin like the embrace of so many jagged kisses, affectionate in their pain. He made an exploratory wriggle and found that his movement was restricted to the perfect degree.

Hannibal sat on the bed with his back flat against the headboard, legs outstretched until his feet perpendicular to Will’s torso and nearly touching.

“Please make your way up the bed and lie across my lap,” Hannibal instructed calmly, hands resting on top of either thigh.

Will snort laughed, but Hannibal’s expression remained unchanged.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Hannibal glared at that, and Will could physically see him plotting the ways he would make him pay for it. It made Will’s mouth grow slack and his skin tingle, but Jesus Christ, how could he really expect him to do this? Not only was it humiliating, but it also seemed physically impossible in his current condition.

“I have found your abdominal muscles to be beyond defined, and one could easily draft a log of more arduous physical trials you have been through in the past five years. The distance is quite minimal. If you desire this, you will have to earn it. Show me how much you want it.” Hannibal’s pupils widened a fraction, and Will rolled his eyes. *You’re enjoying this so much, you fucking sadist.* “If you disagree too vehemently with my request, you know which word to utter.”

Cursing the ever present and painfully obvious erection and intense blush of his cheeks, Will heaved his body onto its side until he was looking at Hannibal’s expectant face and then shifted onto his stomach. That part was relatively easy, but he knew the real challenge would be in crawling *up* the bed almost entirely without the aid of his legs and arms. At first, he attempted to use his elbows, but they mostly just slid ineffectually across the sheets, moving him maybe an inch closer. Next, he fisted the sheets, expanding the minute gap between his hands as much as humanly possible, the bonds digging into the thin skin of his wrists.

Much to his chagrin, he let out a low moan. Not of discomfort but of pleasure from reveling in the exquisite pain. Pain garnered from this performative display Hannibal had *requested*,

had extracted from his *own* fantasies, and that was unbearably erotic to think about. Shoving down his embarrassment, Will gathered the courage to gaze up at Hannibal and digest the hungry look upon his face, the rise and fall of his chest as he marveled at the sight of his partner like this, helpless and strong all at once. Will's cock twitched between his stomach and the bed, and he pulled upward on the handful of sheet, contracting the muscles of his core and arching in the middle, pressing himself together at the center and then out again. The progress was slow. He grunted and sweat slightly with the effort but eventually made his way to Hannibal.

Shakily pushing off with his elbows to rise from the bed, Will rocked back until he landed in an ungraceful sitting position, wincing at the impact of his thighs squeezing his calves. He leaned down until he could grasp the fabric of Hannibal's trousers between his hands, pulling with his fingers and stretching the now sore muscles of his stomach to maneuver his body until it was no longer cockeyed and lay in a nice, straight line across his lover's lap.

Hannibal stroked Will's hair affectionately and rearranged his arms to rest more comfortably on the edge of the bed, trailing the pads of his fingers along Will's spine until the skin broke out into gooseflesh.

"You're doing so very well right now, darling Will. Surprising even yourself with what lengths you're willing to go to please me, aren't you?" Hannibal bent down and murmured into the sweat-slick skin of his neck, depositing the faintest of kisses at the nape before pulling back. "Can you be good for just a little while longer?"

"Yes, Dr. Lecter," Will said, sighing softly as he relaxed into Hannibal's lap, the strain on his abdominals fading. He focused on the warmth seeping from Hannibal's skin through his trousers and onto Will's own body, the life within him palpably radiating outward. Despite the chafe of the silk wrappings, the alien sensation of his heels pressed against the back of his thighs, arms stretched overhead like some medieval torture method, Will felt serene. He was proud of achieving this, grateful for the successful diversion, and startled by how well it worked. Their experience with this was still minimal enough that Will didn't know what to expect of himself or of Hannibal either. A quiet ripple made its way through the entirety of his being like a soothing ointment taking effect at the moment of contact as it cascaded down his form, coating him in an invisible film no outside force could penetrate.

"I will do this six times. The intervals at which they will occur is at my discretion. Do you understand?" Hannibal circled Will's left buttock with his hand, cupping it for a second before withdrawing completely.

"Yes, Dr. Lecter. I understand." Will drew in a ragged, anticipatory breath and closed his eyes.

"Relax, Will."

Will nodded and tried to bid the tension to flow from his muscles as much as he could in this state, picturing his limbs loose and fluid.

"Good boy," Hannibal whispered, and Will moaned at his praise.

The first slap made Will jerk in surprise, more from the sudden sound than the impact. It wasn't as harsh as he was expecting. *There are still five to go* he reminded himself. Knowing Hannibal, he would keep the pressure varied and subvert all predictions Will attempted to make.

"Remain still, please. Can you do that for me?" Hannibal was firm and unequivocal but there was a note of kindness underneath it all that made Will melt into the embrace of his lap.

"I can." Will exhaled and gripped the edge of the bed between his fingers.

The next two came in quick succession and were harder than the first, one administered to the right cheek and one to the left. Will idly wondered if Hannibal would keep it symmetrical to please the aesthete in him. The sting vibrated up his spine as he waited for the next connection of palm to flesh. Hannibal's fingertips traced the edges of the red patterns forming on Will's ass before dipping into the cleft for a gentle upward stroke ending at his tailbone. Will shivered and moaned beneath him, aching for more. More of his hands coming down on his ass, more of his fingers teasing his entrance, more of anything and everything Hannibal could offer.

One more smack, more forceful still, landed on Will's skin, tugging the breath from his lungs. When an interminable minute passed without another, Will whined, a high-pitched begging noise that broke Hannibal's stoicism. The answering groan from the older man was small, but Will *knew* he heard it. Yet he held out, fingers hovering but never touching. *He's waiting for me to break.* The realization washed over Will, and as it did, he knew he would give in.

"Please, Dr. Lecter," Will pleaded. "Don't make me wait anymore."

"That eager for it, are you?"

"*Yes. Please."*

Will couldn't turn to see Hannibal's face, but he hoped there was a smile blooming at the corners of his perfect mouth.

The final two blows tested Will's endurance. He clutched the bedsheets, knuckles white with the effort to not twitch and writhe. A contorted groan came from his throat, equal parts relief and arousal and pent up breath he didn't know he had been holding in.

"You did very well, my love," Hannibal declared encouragingly, rubbing his back and his now sore ass. "Another time, I will perhaps test your limits further by keeping you restrained afterward, but I believe you have reached your capacity for today."

"I'm sorry," Will lamented. "It's weird. Only a few minutes ago, I felt like I could tolerate this position for days, but now…"

Hannibal chuckled.

"There is a euphoric effect produced by pain as well as sexual excitement that can delude one into pressing beyond their limits, but it is only temporary. Never apologize for crossing that

threshold. I assure you that I am not disappointed in your performance at all. Quite the contrary." Hannibal began to unlace his legs first, soothing the reddened skin with adoring fingers as Will hissed from the cracking of his knees and the pins and needles in his extremities. After untying his wrists, Hannibal helped Will extricate himself from his lap and gently maneuvered his body until he was lying on his stomach next to him.

Hannibal's thumbs dug into Will's shoulders, eliciting a deep groan of relief from the man beneath him as his fingers fanned their way down his back. "I'm also very mindful of how long and in what ways a human body can endure binding without the risk of damage."

"I would expect nothing less from you." Will basked in the pressure of Hannibal's nimble fingers rubbing every knot out of every muscle they touched. "God, a massage has never felt so fucking good."

"Any particular area you would like me to focus?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Not at all. Decisions regarding aftercare should be left to the submissive. Or at the very least, they should be consulted as I understand it. Previously, we've fallen into activities without much discussion beforehand, but I would like to take the time to ask you about your preferences in more depth."

Will shyly glanced over his shoulder, and Hannibal looked up from where his hands were working their magic. His eyes were tender and sincere.

"Okay…I haven't thought about it much, really. I like anything like this where you're…" Will bit his lip, "It sounds a little conceited to say 'paying a lot of attention to me.'"

Hannibal smiled and brushed the hair back from Will's forehead.

"Not at all. You enjoy being attended to. The way I have washed you in the past or the way I am taking the care to leave no ache or superb curve of your beautiful body untouched right now." Hannibal cradled a calf, stroking the bulbous muscle at the top before following a clean line downward to illustrate his point. "And as you already know, I enjoy attending to you too."

"Yeah." Will sighed contentedly and smiled. "I don't think I feel up for being bathed right now, but I do like it. I think I like the way it reminds me of our shower that first night in the cabin."

Will glanced down reticently, and Hannibal gazed right back, eyes undeniably fond.

Hannibal turned his attention back to the massage, caressing with his lips as well as his hands now, covering every inch of skin with his hot mouth and skillful fingers. Will moaned as Hannibal made his way down and swiped his tongue along his entrance. Will whined when that warm wetness disappeared. Hannibal continued down Will's body, lips tracing the length of his thigh and calf, planting a soft kiss at the base of his ankle.

“Would you turn onto your back, please?”

Will obliged, and Hannibal was on him immediately, kissing his forehead, his cheeks, his lips, his collarbone, and the length of his arm, gently licking and sucking his fingers. Something welled inside him, gathering in a twisted mass deep in his stomach and rushing into the tightness of his throat. Hannibal continued worshiping his body, leaving behind faint impressions of the heat of his mouth everywhere he went. Will’s chest, his nipples, his stomach. When he reached the smile on his belly and placed a flurry of feathery kisses along the length of it, eyes closed and breath stuttering like he was paying homage to an entity he didn’t believe he was worthy of approaching, Will couldn’t stifle the sob that rose from his constricted throat. A tear fell from the corner of each of his eyes, drifting down his temple and absorbing into the soft cotton of the sheets below. Hannibal lifted his head when he heard the change in the rhythm of Will’s breath.

“Can you stop…please? I-it’s just…too much.” Will was uncertain how to elaborate. Too much of what exactly?

Hannibal acceded without question, concern written in the way his eyes softened and his lips twitched at the edges. A remarkable thing really, the way witnessing Will in any sort of true discomfort only propelled Hannibal to fully embody the role of caretaker now. It wasn’t as though Will didn’t believe him when he had asked (*Do you find that your…inclinations lie more toward the healing category and less to the destructive side these days? Pain inflicted on you would feel like cutting into myself were it to happen now).* But something about this intimacy now, the way Hannibal was so engulfed in the simple act of blanketing Will’s body with chaste kisses, no means to a carnal end in mind, content in this and *only* this, made the realization wash over him more thoroughly than it had before. And the result was overpowering.

He dreaded having to explain this to Hannibal, and exhaled shakily when Hannibal rescued him from that awkwardness.

“No one has ever taken care of you, Will. Not your father, not…” *Your wife.* Hannibal’s eyes narrowed for a second before he composed himself and moved to lay at Will’s side, threading an arm around his waist and drawing him to his chest. “You have never allowed yourself to be joined with anyone completely because you have never been fully transparent in your wants and needs. You couldn’t have been. No one was willing to see you, and you were not willing to see yourself. You are with me now. Here. Do not retreat. You have let me bathe you, feed you, why should the tides turn and overwhelm you now?”

Hannibal stroked Will’s hair and brushed a silent tear away with his thumb.

“I don’t know…it’s the summation of everything. I felt you kissing my scar…so doting…and it ignited this chain reaction of epiphany.”

“Epiphany about what?” Hannibal stroked Will’s shoulder.

“We’ve come so far. *You’ve* come so far. Doesn’t it ever hit you out of the blue? The sheer improbability of all these elements aligning?”

Will frowned as Hannibal started laughing, the points of his teeth peeking out. In spite of his annoyance, Will joined in and pinched the skin below Hannibal's armpit.

"I just cried, and your response is to *laugh* at me?!"

"No, no, not at all, dear Will." Hannibal pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "But surely you must grasp the absurdity of asking such a question. I believe I exhibit the awe that I experience on a daily basis quite freely."

Will laughed again and buried his nose in Hannibal's neck.

"Point taken."

"Would you like to hear about one of my secret indulgences? A private moment I have repeated many times since we survived the cliff?"

Will pulled back, propped his head up with his fist, and nodded, intrigued about where this was headed.

"As you know, I do not require much sleep and tend to rise long before you do." Hannibal traced Will's bottom lip with his forefinger. "In those moments before I leave our bed to start the day, while you still slumber and are not yet aware of my presence, I sometimes feel disoriented. It is a split second no more detectable than a fleeting dust mote when the sunbeam goes dark, but in that moment it's as if I died on that cliff and this is a dream. Or perhaps I am still in my prison cell and you never came at all. And then I *remember*. Reality slides into view as confusion recedes, and I kiss you. Your shoulder, your hair, your cheek," Hannibal touched each spot as he named it, "whatever piece of you I need to feel under my lips to hold the very essence of you inside me at that moment in time. I never forget that fate dealt us this rare version of life together. Never."

"Jesus, Hannibal…are you trying to make me cry again?" Will smiled as his eyes welled up, and Hannibal kissed away the moisture gathering on his eyelids.

"I love you, Will." Hannibal whispered against his lips before kissing him deep and slow, their bodies folding into each other in a way neither of them could imagine living without now. "Better?"

"Yes. Perfect. I love you too."

"May I make love to you now?" Hannibal looked back at him with half-lidded eyes, his chest rising and falling as though he was already inside him and overcome with lust.

"Please," Will whispered as he moved onto his back. "I want to look at you."

"Yes." Hannibal nodded and coated two fingers in lube. He began to work Will open, leisurely and meticulously in a way that made Will's whole body feel like it was on fire. When his fingers were all the way inside, he started alternating between a thrusting motion and rubbing Will's prostate, the perfect teasing balance that always left him helplessly

rocking his hips onto Hannibal's fingers. But not this time. This time neither of them were in any rush to forge ahead.

It felt as intense as it had the first time Hannibal did this, every nerve ending a live wire, time slowing to a crawl until he could swear he was aware of every neuron firing inside him when those long fingers caressed and prodded. When Hannibal withdrew his fingers and finally began to press his cock inside, Will was so relaxed there was no resistance. Just heat, heat, wonderful heat that coursed through Will's blood, enveloping his skin as if they were still living in the tropical summer nights.

"*Fuck.* I…I can *feel* you." Will's words dissipated into broken moans. It was too hard to convey what he meant. *I feel every part of you right now. You inside me. Me inside you. I feel it everywhere and I feel everything so much that I think I might burst, but I WANT to.* Hannibal looked back at him, eyes never leaving Will's, and he smiled so sweetly it made Will's heart ache.

"I know. I can feel you too." Hannibal curved an arm around Will's shoulder and curled his fingers in the hair at the base of his neck. Still not breaking their gaze, he fucked into him at such an erotically slow pace, every drag of the head of Hannibal's cock against his prostate making Will feel like he might die from pleasure. The unhurried pace gave him time to focus on every little hot ember of sensation, and he was quickly becoming overstimulated in the best way.

"I never knew it could be like this either," Hannibal breathed, the hand in Will's hair brushing over his flushed cheek.

A small laugh from Will turned into a moan as Hannibal angled his hips just right.

"I can't believe you remember me saying that," Will gasped, clutching onto Hannibal's shoulders and pushing back to meet his thrusts.

"I remember *everything*, Will," Hannibal choked out between groans, eyes glistening as he watched Will adoringly. He reached down to take Will's erection in hand, and it was only a moment before he was spilling on Hannibal's hand. The orgasm rushed through him, peak after peak he didn't think would ever end, his whole body wracked with waves of shivers as he held Hannibal tighter.

As Will's body clenched around his cock, Hannibal started to come inside him, the drive of his hips slowing down as they held each other, sweaty and perfectly relaxed, every inch of their bodies slotting together like they were designed to fit together.

"God…that was really…I felt so…"

Hannibal laughed and kissed Will's perspiring neck.

"Satisfying you until you are stammering incomprehensibly is one of life's greatest pleasures."

“And you’re really fucking good at it. In so many different ways.” Will looked down at Hannibal’s head on his chest, and combed his fingers through the sweaty hair on his forehead.

“Are you tired?”

“Surprisingly no. Why?”

“There is another layer to my plans for this evening, but it will take a few hours to complete.”

“Does it involve me being tied to a tree somewhere? Because I don’t think my stamina will allow for a round two. Not for at least another twenty four hours anyway.”

Hannibal smiled and leaned up to kiss Will.

“No bondage of any kind. Only patience and a hearty appetite.”

The feast arranged on the dining table was of hedonistic proportions fit for a fabled king and his entire court. Will dutifully kept out of the kitchen until summoned by Hannibal so the lavish extent of the spread was a complete surprise.

Hannibal beamed proudly as Will surveyed the veritable buffet of mouth-watering concoctions and took his place at the table.

“You *do* realize there are only two of us, and that neither of us have multiple stomachs like cows, right?” Will teased.

“Actually, that is a widespread misconception about cattle. The more accurate description of their digestive system is that it is in fact a single stomach with four chambers – ”

Will placed a hand on his shoulder as Hannibal poured each of them a glass of Beaujolais.

“I’m aware. The fact remains that we’re still going to have to grow extra chambers of our own to eat all this. But it just so happens that I’m feeling up to the extremely tasty challenge.”

“Glad to hear it. I very much wanted to provide you with a proper feast and give you a thorough introduction to French cuisine. We have confit de canard representing the Sud-Ouest, cassoulet for Toulousain, tartiflette ensuring a seat at the table for the Rhône-Alpes, and ratatouille bringing a Provençal note to the meal. I regret that I had neither the time nor resources to give each region their proper due, but I believe that, combined with dessert, this is a sufficient cultural cross-section for now.” Hannibal dished out an evenly proportioned sampling of each item onto Will’s plate and his own before sitting down and raising his wine

glass. They toasted, and Will salivated as he inhaled the varied smells of the flawless food. The first bite of duck confit made his eyes roll back in his head.

“This duck confit is so good, I may leave you for it.”

“It would be quite the contentious relationship. A romantic union between man and epicurean meal has yet to be sanctioned by the law. Very much frowned upon in cultures all across the globe.” Hannibal smiled before elegantly layering a bite onto his fork.

“I don’t care who disapproves of our love. The confit and I are getting married, and there’s nothing society or you can do about it.” Will took a bite of the tartiflette and moaned. “Never mind. I take it back. The tartiflette is the one. Or maybe I should look into Mormonism?”

Hannibal put down his utensils and looked at Will with a degree of severity that was puzzling.

“What is it?” Will stopped eating and watched Hannibal across the table.

“I had planned to wait until after dinner, but you have inadvertently provided me with an opening I believe I must seize.” Hannibal extended a hand to Will, palm up. Will entwined their fingers and waited for Hannibal to continue. “Do you remember the excess silver that hardened in the casting mold? I kept it.”

“Really?” Will smiled, eyes shining at Hannibal’s sentimentality. “That’s very thoughtful of you, actually. I regretted not paying attention to it, but packing and leaving was such a blur. I didn’t think of it until afterwards. It’s not like you to keep trophies though. At least not detectable ones.”

Will blushed at the thought of Hannibal breaking his rules because of Will. Because of how holy and special sharing that pleasure with Will was to him.

“This once in a lifetime event demanded an exception I could not ignore. I cannot begin to tell you what it means to me that you turned a deaf ear to all pragmatism in favor of hunting with me and making your own savage canvas from his unworthy skin."

"Even with all the worrying...which you greatly alleviated by the way," Will smirked and raised an eyebrow, "I can't find it in myself to regret it. Not even a little. I loved *every* second of it."

Hannibal smiled, got up from his chair, and made his way around the table. He knelt beside Will and lay a hand on his thigh. Will's brow wrinkled in confusion, but he slid his chair outward a bit, angling his body more toward Hannibal. When Hannibal reached inside his jacket pocket, Will's heart caught in his throat. *No, it can't be.* Hannibal pulled out a small, maroon velvet ring box and rested it on Will's thigh. *Oh god, it is. It absolutely is.*

"Hannibal, I - " Will breathlessly began, but Hannibal placed warm fingers over his lips.

"Will you grant me a moment to explain before you say anything?"

Will nodded, too dazed and shocked to continue anyway. He had no idea what would have tumbled out of his mouth if Hannibal hadn't stopped him.

Hannibal opened the ring box, retrieved a silver band with simple but elegant vine-like filigree on the outer edge, clasped Will's hand, and placed it in his open palm.

"There's a silversmith in Vouvant. His family has passed the trade down through generations for longer than most people can fathom time existing. A rich history of cultivated skill that can be traced back to medieval times. He engraves with such painstaking detail and admirable artistry yet to him it is merely an unremarkable vocation, a predetermined course of career that he neither detests nor loves but rather dwells in without question, slipping into it like a pair of tailored trousers."

"Built to do that and only that," Will whispered, turning the ring over in his palm. The light glinted on some ornate script on the inside. He brought it closer to read the words. *"To my darling W, the teacup who gathered together again."* Will gasped and fought off tears for the second time that day. "Oh, Hannibal...I..."

"Will...Like the building blocks of matter itself, you are a substance that cannot be destroyed. You are fire itself at its very core, a dazzling, scorching, wild thing that cannot be contained or snuffed out. If the world burned to ash, still we would remain, triumphant and eternally smoldering in a formidable blaze unlike any other. I would do anything for you. I would lay entire cities to waste to see you smile. I would do anything at all to keep you by my side now that I have been blessed to have you here. I would search for you in the depths of the underworld like Orpheus for his Eurydice." Hannibal's eyes were moist as he reached for Will's free hand and softly kissed the knuckles. "I hope you will not find it too trite or saccharine of a gesture, but would you do me the honor of becoming my husband? I realize it is quite impossible to be legally bound to one another due to the nature of our lives, but I do not believe the legitimacy of our union is determined by manmade courts. I imagine you feel the same. I would derive immeasurable pleasure from introducing you as my partner in all manner of the word wherever we may roam for the rest of our days."

“A wedding ring forged from a memento of our first plotted kill.” Will beamed. This token of their love was so apt, so well-suited to them. He wished he could muster a response as eloquent as Hannibal’s vows of devotion, but no words would come. He was far too astonished so he did the only thing he could. Will leaned forward and sealed their mouths in a passionate kiss, the ring enclosed within his fist.

“May I take that as an enthusiastic acceptance?” Hannibal cradled Will’s face in his hands, his eyes displaying a rare note of anxiety as he waited for approval.

“Yes yes yes. I can’t really,” Will laughed and opened his hand to gaze down at the ring, “figure out how to speak right now so just imagine I’m saying yes in every way possible in every language that exists.”

Hannibal kissed him again, fingers tangling in Will’s curls. Will could feel the curve of his smile as Hannibal devoured his mouth.

“Will you put it on me?”

Hannibal nodded and plucked the ring from Will's proffered palm. He slipped it on Will's slender finger and finally rose from the floor. Will stood up as well and folded Hannibal into a tight embrace, burying his face in his lover's neck.

"We have to get one for you."

"There was enough silver for a matching set."

Will smiled against Hannibal's skin and kissed his neck.

"Of course there was. Is it engraved too?"

"No."

"I'll choose something and surprise you with it."

"I was counting on it." Hannibal squeezed Will's waist and kissed his hair.

"Did you also make an elaborate French themed wedding cake?"

"Something like that."

Will chuckled and pulled back enough to look at Hannibal's immensely happy face.

"I love you so goddamn much."

"I love you too, Will. I always have."

Chapter End Notes

Okay sooooo please forgive me for STILL keeping you in suspense about what's going on with Jack and Alana and all other plot business, but like I said it was our last smut hurrah! We're back into the action with the next one.

You know how people post those memes on Tumblr about blushing and giggling in public when reading fluff but being totally stone faced when reading smut? The proposal here is definitely that level of fluff. So much in fact that I almost feel embarrassed haha. BUT I COULDN'T HELP IT. And I finally got to work that title in. :) As @castellomargot noticed when editing this, I've seen the movie Secretary a lllloottt. It may have seeped into my brain when I was writing this one. ;)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> Soooo since the last chapter was a smutty interlude, you may want to skim chapter 10 for a bit of a refresher on what was going on with Alana, Margot, and Jack. I hope you enjoy this thickening of the plot! Please let me know your thoughts. They give me life, and I'm extra curious about how you will feel about these added complications.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next several days, they barely left bed, voracious sexual appetites never satiated. Will would scarcely have time to recover from his last orgasm before Hannibal's hands would avidly stake their claim on his body again and vice versa. It was reminiscent of their recovery time at the cabin except even more intense, more feverish as they were no longer nursing any injuries and knew the landscape of each other's bodies better than they even knew their own. Eventually, their libidos finally wrung dry of every last drop of pulsating energy, Hannibal turned to Will with a languid smile.

"Would you allow me to take you to an event in Paris tonight? I know you have grown very fond of our relative isolation. I have as well, but I am eager to show you the city."

"Make up for lost time and show me off to some pompous, old money intellectuals I will immediately despise?" Will opened his eyes and turned to face Hannibal. Hannibal admired the way the sunlight streamed in through the window and highlighted his fine form.

"Yes. Two birds with one stone, as they say."

"Okay." Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's shoulders and hooked a leg around his waist, burying his face in Hannibal's neck.

"Hmm, suspiciously agreeable."

"Must be the copious orgasms. Short circuits the brain."

"I will keep that in mind should I require your acquiescence on matters in which you are bound to be disagreeable."

"I should probably get a haircut. I'm looking a little *Jeremiah Johnson* these days, and I'm guessing wherever you're taking me isn't a lumberjack convention…if I pull back right now, am I going to find an irritatingly smug expression on your face?"

"I wouldn't categorize it as such. Gratified perhaps. Would you like me to cut it for you?"

"Is there anything you *can't* do?" Will leaned back enough to grin at him.

“Unlike yourself, I am abysmally unskilled in all things mechanical. I am afraid you will be the only one under the hoods of cars in this partnership.” Hannibal kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t want me to teach you?”

“I prefer to maintain a safe distance between myself and motor oil.”

“I figured that.” Will laughed and playfully nipped at his neck.

Winston barked twice and thumped his fluffy tail on the hardwood. Will reluctantly rolled away from Hannibal’s arms. He knew if he didn’t get up soon, indolence would set in and the day would be lost to lounging around like some upper-crust European housewife vacationing in her summer villa. All in all, not a bad way to pass the day, but he imagined he would need time to make himself presentable for whatever mysterious event Hannibal had in store for them.

“I’m taking him for a quick walk,” Will said as he slipped a black t-shirt over his head. “I *suppose* you can groom and dress me to your specifications when I get back. No use fighting it.”

Will winked and pulled pants he hadn’t been able to find a use for the past few days. Hannibal sat up against the headboard with arms folded behind his neck, graceful body on full display.

“I greatly look forward to it.”

Will’s own spent body somehow found the strength to send a fleeting glint of arousal through his belly at the sight, and he groaned weakly.

When Hannibal was finished, Will had to admit he looked better than he ever had. His beard was neatly, evenly trimmed, and his hair was cut and tousled into something much tamer and more kempt than he thought his curls capable of.

“Any objections or constructive notes?” Hannibal wrapped his arms around Will’s waist and tucked his chin between his shoulder and neck. They both looked into the mirror at the newly snipped and combed man before them.

“Not at all. What are we going to do about you though?” Will smirked and tugged on a lengthy strand of Hannibal’s silky locks.

“Alas, I don’t have a lover who is quite so adroit with scissors so I will have to venture into town to visit the barber. Care to join me?” Hannibal smiled and kissed his temple.

“Can we get your ring engraved?”

“Of course. Alexandre works quite quickly. We’ll drop it off first. If he has no impending orders, it will be ready by the time we have finished our other errands. What have you decided on for the inscription?”

“Now where would be the fun in telling you?” Will turned his head and captured Hannibal’s lips in a gentle kiss.

Seeing Hannibal with his newly cut and styled hair stole the breath from Will’s lungs. He looked just like he had when they first met, sandy gray hair parted and swept to one side, the faintest layer of stubble on clean skin.

Hannibal tilted his head and watched Will as they walked back to the silversmith.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” Will smiled and ran a hand down Hannibal’s back. “You just look really nice.”

Will waved as he saw Alexandre standing outside his workshop, a soiled apron tied around his waist and a cigarette dangling from his lips. He had the weathered hands of a lifelong laborer and the amiable eyes of a man accustomed to the way people stopped for impromptu conversation in small towns instead of careening off into opposite directions.

After shaking hands, Will ducked inside with Alexandre to get the finished product. He thanked him in French that, while still nowhere near Hannibal’s level, was beginning to resemble something acceptable, and slipped the ring box into his pants pocket. The Lithuanian seemed to be mistaken for a native everywhere they went, and Will quickly grew exasperated from watching the same scenario play out incessantly. Hannibal would speak and as the conversation continued, the person he was addressing would inevitably ask where he was from. Thus began an endless exchange of *“Non! C'est impossible!” “C’est vrai. Je ne suis pas français*.” and various other praise-leaden protestations from the other party as Hannibal soaked up the attention like a flower basking in the summer sun.

As they leisurely strolled home, hand in hand, Will had to bite back the smile that formed as he ignored the speculative looks Hannibal kept casting his way.

Hannibal's bespoke tuxedo completed the immaculate image, and Will began to fight growing nerves for the first time that day. He knew a bit about where they were headed (the historic InterContinental Paris Le Grand Hotel) and the cursory details of why (some rich benefactor of the arts honoring another even richer patron who was breaking ground on a new gallery soon), but Will's social wheelhouse had never included engagements of this magnitude. Without Hannibal, he was a fish flopping on land.

Hannibal straightened Will's bowtie and cast him a placating smile.

"I will be by your side all evening, and there will be many opportunities to escape for air. The need for cigarettes and balcony imbibing is deeply ingrained in French culture. I promise not to overextend you."

"Thanks." Will turned around to see his reflection. "Who *owns* multiple tuxes?!"

Hannibal ignored his flippant comment, not reacting with even so much as a blink. To the casual observer, they would probably seem like a couple who had been together for decades, their inconsequential bickering finely honed like a well-rehearsed dance.

"You look wonderful. With you on my arm, I shall be the envy of everyone in the room." Hannibal kissed the side of his neck, and Will melted.

"Now, don't start with that again. We might never leave. Oh! I almost forgot." Will hurried over to the bureau and removed the ring box. He walked back to Hannibal and handed it him.

Hannibal carefully took the ring out and held it up to the light to decipher the inscription. *"To H, if the world burned to ash, still we would remain."*

"When you said it, I knew it was the perfect choice. We're so complex, but you encapsulated us and everything that has passed between us. It might have been a lengthy and onerous journey," They exchanged wistful smiles at the reductive nature of that statement, "getting here, but cliché as it is…I think we're stronger for it. And it's hard to imagine anything that could tear us apart now that we've walked through an insurmountable amount of wreckage to find each other. I'm not as scared about separation anymore because I don't think it's really possible. Not even through death."

Hannibal smiled at Will, and it was familiar. It was the same smile he had given him when Will unexpectedly defeated Tobias. The same smile he had worn after they made love for the first time and began to slip into the ease of being together, drinking and laughing on the couch in Hannibal's cabin.

"Thank you, Will. For everything."

"You're welcome," Will leaned in and kissed his curved mouth, "Husband."

"Will you do the honors?" Hannibal offered the ring to Will.

"Of course." Will beamed back at him as he slipped the band onto Hannibal's left ring finger. "Hannibal Lecter, the most sentimental cannibal of them all."

“Only for you.” Hannibal stretched out his long fingers and admired the beautiful evidence that Will was truly his. *I am yours as you are mine. Always.*

The ballroom of the hotel was the most palatial space Will had ever stepped foot in. It made him feel small in a way that, while intimidating, also made him feel closer to Hannibal. One’s eyes only needed to rove over the detailed embellishments along the gold and red ceiling for a few seconds to understand the appeal of surrounding oneself with beauty. Will couldn’t imagine how many kilos of gold leaf had been poured into this elaborate room. The ceiling stretched so far above them, it gave the illusion one might end up touching a cloud if they punctured the roof.

Their arrival was a blur of introductions Will hardly had time to process, and dinner, while delicious (rack of lamb with a leek and butternut squash risotto as the main course), consisted of multilingual banter that he had a hard time following. Hannibal stayed true to his word and never left Will’s side, checking in periodically to make sure he never felt neglected. Still, Will couldn’t full shake an internal air of awkwardness and the knowledge that a life with Hannibal would include functions like this from time to time. He reminded himself that Hannibal had been an admirable partner full of compromise up to this point, and now it was his turn.

They were seated at a table with an Italian couple whose verbal sparring skills rivaled that of Hannibal and Will, and despite only being able to catch snippets of the conversation when they slipped into English, he was enjoying being a spectator. They were a baron and baroness, respectively, although the details of how and what exactly their status meant were fuzzy to Will. Rinaldo and Hannibal were engaged in a dry, endless discussion on the merits of the Italian justice system. Will heard mention of the origins of the Zanardelli Code, rolled his eyes, and silently thanked the gods of capitalism for creating a system in which the wealthy never ran out of champagne. He downed the rest of his glass and gratefully accepted another from a passing waiter with a silver platter filled to the brim.

“They do love to pontificate, don’t they?” Gabriella sympathetically smiled at Will and tucked a strand of wavy jet black hair behind her ear. She was a very attractive woman of about forty, suffused with that prolonged youthful glow that only comes from a combination of exceptional Mediterranean genetics and the leisure, good food and skincare provided by wealth. “But looking at him, I bet the sex is worth it.”

Will spat some champagne back into his glass and choked on a laugh. He glanced over at Hannibal, but neither his partner nor Rinaldo skipped a beat in their conversation.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re in a trance of haughty self-congratulation. I guarantee they won’t hear anything we say,” She said with a mischievous grin.

“Well…” Will laughed again, “You’re not wrong. On either count.”

“Good for you! How long have you been together? He still has that moony look in his eyes like the sun rises and sets on you so I’m guessing it’s either new or he is just incurably smitten.”

“A little bit of both. Long courtship with a relatively newly consummated union, but he has been sporting that look for many years. However, I was a little bit slower on the uptake. God…I’m starting to sound like him…” Will shook his head and took another sip of champagne.

Gabriella laughed, a musical, lilting sound and flipped her silky mane with a manicured hand.

“You don’t believe people when they say that will happen or you think it isn’t something you have to worry about until you’re old, but it happens quicker than you think.”

“God help us all if that’s the case. The world doesn’t need two Étienne Jessens. It’s difficult enough to contend with one.” Will breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank Jesus and Yahweh and Shiva and every holy being known to every culture that you didn’t say Hannibal Lecter.* Will wondered if he would always be this nervous when venturing out in public directly after adopting a new alias. He hid it well, but it was always nerve-wracking to keep the fresh details at the forefront of his mind.

Hannibal had a very laissez-faire attitude about it. There wasn’t a focus on memorizing details like a fact sheet to be quizzed on later. At first, this stressed Will out. How were they to keep up appearances if they didn’t thoroughly go over the ins and outs of what those appearances were to be? But then he watched Hannibal in action, how he charmed and dazzled, how smoothly he shifted the topics of discussion, how he picked up on what interested and seduced the person he was speaking to and used it to his advantage. Hannibal was correct in his supposition that Will’s empathy would allow him to deftly do this as well. He only needed practice. Mainly practice in pretending to care about strangers long enough to glean where the focus of their particular type of self-involvement lay so he could exploit it.

Reflecting on the past, Will realized that despite years of friendship and cordial relations with people like Alana, Hannibal kept discernible details, the sort of personal facts most people clung to when engaging in small talk, to a minimum with ease. And more to the point, he did it in such a way that didn’t give birth to doubt. What would any of Baltimore’s high society have said they *really* knew about Hannibal Lecter? He loves opera, he crafts impressive gourmet food, he wears a three piece suit like he arrived in this world swaddled in one, and he’s a psychiatrist who used to be a surgeon. Nothing of the finer points of how these things came to be.

If anything, his intricate vagueness only added to his mystique. Will supposed part of this was simply the fact that affluence was a very different beast. What was deified and excused as intriguing eccentricity among the rich tended to be vilified and whispered about in judgmental tones when present in the common folk. The arcane was held in high esteem and only added to the mythology of the person. Money secured a level of discretion Will wasn’t accustomed to, and he pondered how his antisocial, gruff tendencies would have been received if he had grown up in the world of private boarding schools and summers on the French Riviera.

Gabriella was rather easy to pinpoint. Will was certain she would be content to play the roles of the long-suffering gossipy spouses who have a boundless supply of funny anecdotes about their significant other's shortcomings all night. With a spicy side of sex talk, naturally.

"Ah, but you must never forget, you're rubbing off on him all the time too. Sometimes you have to find a beneficial way to wield that." She smirked and raised her glass across the table. Will smiled and clinked it to hers before the contents. The small orchestra seated at the front of the ballroom launched into a waltz, and couples in tuxedos and opulent gowns made their way to the ornamental floor to dance. "You know, it's very rude not to ask a beautiful, unoccupied woman to dance."

"Forgive me, Gabriella, but I was hoping to have the first dance of the night with my Aiden. I will gladly relinquish him to your arms afterward if you wish," Hannibal interjected, reaching under the table to lace his fingers with Will's.

"Of course. I bet the two of you will be the handsomest couple to grace that floor tonight." Gabriella beamed at them before turning to Rinaldo with a stern "now it's your turn to pay attention to me" look.

"Gabriella, cara mia. Shall we show them how it's done?" Rinaldo flashed her a seductive smile and extended his hand.

"Oh, now he remembers I exist." She winked at Will and let her husband lead her onto the floor.

Hannibal started to get up from his chair, but Will lightly tugged him back down.

"Look, *Étienne*, if you think I'm going out there and making an ass out of myself, you're sorely mistaken." Will gave Hannibal his best no nonsense expression, but it only made the older man chuckle.

"Indulge me, please. It is only a waltz. A simple box step. You can lead if it is easier for you, and I am not above bribery in this instance." Hannibal smiled and cradled the back of Will's neck.

"Oh really?" Will raised his eyebrows and leaned in to whisper in Hannibal's ear, "Can I say something unapologetically base and crude?"

"Why ask permission? It hasn't stopped you before." Hannibal smirked, and Will rolled his eyes.

"You're an oral sex champion, the absolute best I've ever experienced. Sometimes I wonder if it's a cannibal thing. You know, the whole tendency to take consumption *literally* adding an extra gusto to the act I didn't know had been lacking in everyone else? Soooo, I'll dance with you for the price of one amazing blowjob in a place of my choosing." Will leaned back and crossed his legs, utterly pleased with himself.

Hannibal cocked his head and looked Will up and down.

“Why wager something you would receive regardless?”

“Details, doctor,” Will stood up and held out his hand, “I said the place of my *choosing*. There’s no telling where that will be.”

“Wicked boy.” Hannibal smiled, slipped his hand in Will’s, and followed him onto the floor.

There was some ungainly fumbling as Will struggled with where to place his hands. He had never done this with a man. Hell, he hadn’t really danced with many women in his life and most certainly not this formally. Hannibal placed Will’s hand on his hip, gripped Will’s shoulder with his own, and joined their free hands.

“Are you familiar with how the waltz works?”

“In theory but not in practice.” Will closed his eyes and pictured the dance, trying to translate the image to muscle memory. “Forward, together, back, together, and repeat?”

“Very good. You will step forward with your left foot first, bringing your right forward until they are parallel before bringing them together. Then you’ll go back with the right – ”

“Then left goes back, right joins left, and we start all over again.”

“Exactly.” Hannibal smiled warmly, clearly delighted to be experiencing this with him. Will wasn’t sure why it mattered to him, but seeing Hannibal this happy was worth it. “Shall we?”

Will took a shaky breath and nodded. It was stilted at first, but Hannibal didn’t rush the pace, didn’t force him to match the tempo of the music until he was more confident in the steps. It wasn’t long before they were gliding across the floor smoothly, and Will began to relax, his shoulders rolling back as he stood straighter and met Hannibal’s gaze, no longer preoccupied with preventing any foot related blunders. He relied on their natural ability to read each other’s cues, to fall in sync and find a shared rhythm no matter the activity. The look of sheer love that Hannibal reflected back at him made his cheeks rosy.

“You look very content.”

“I am. I’m dancing with the most remarkable person in the room.” Hannibal’s hand trailed from Will’s shoulder to his neck, caressing the soft skin before sliding back into place.

“Stop it.” Will blushed deeper and tightened his grip on Hannibal’s waist. “You’re making me want to kiss you.”

“I wouldn’t stop you.”

Just then, the music stopped and the dancers clapped for the orchestra. Will and Hannibal kept their eyes locked, everything and everyone else in the room fading into insignificant shapes. Will dropped Hannibal’s hand, curled his fingers around his neck, and, before he could be silenced by his own overthinking, pulled Hannibal in for a soft, lingering kiss. They smiled at each other like the besotted fools they were. Hannibal opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by the sound of a glass shattering on the solid floor. They both turned

their heads in the direction of the sound, and there on the edge of the ballroom, standing among the tables of fine china and crystal champagne flutes, was Alana Bloom.

Will couldn't hear anything over the throb of blood in his temples, the ringing like the sound after a gunshot blast is fired too close to unprotected ears, the viscous presence of bile churning in his gut. He turned to Hannibal, and the predator mode was fully activated. It was masked in gentleman's clothing but shrewd and lethal all the same. In a frighteningly short time, he was at Alana's side, chilling smile stretching across his lips as his large hand discreetly clamped around her small bicep. A waiter working the event cleared the mess of broken glass into a dustpan. Light passed through the jagged fragments, kaleidoscopes of reflected color bouncing off her white gown. For a brief moment, she looked soft, the easygoing wrap dress-clad Alana he knew so long ago, strolling through the fields of his property in her farm girl boots with wind-chafed skin and smiling eyes. Before she was hardened by time and tragedy. Before she was hardened by Hannibal. But then her eyes flickered like searing flame, and she was fierce once again. The Alana of those days had long since been shed, and Will didn't expect she could ever return to that version of herself any more than Will could remember who he had been before Hannibal. The waiter scurried away in a flash, all evidence of the small snag in the merriment of the evening swept away.

Will tried to speak. A weak "Hannibal" caught in his parched throat and was mangled into an unintelligible noise of anguish. An eternal second later, his frozen feet unglued themselves from the floor and he joined Hannibal by Alana's side, trying to move with a speed that didn't betray the urgency surging through him.

Will stopped in front of Alana, who was stock-still like a deer in the headlights, trembling slightly but fighting to hold her composure. He gulped, expression oscillating from fear to sympathy as he absorbed her distress. Will could visualize the conversations people might have afterward, the confused, demanding questions as they devoured the news of Alana's death and Hannibal Lecter's sudden appearance in France after months of no indication he had survived. *"Why didn't she run?! Why didn't she just shout and cause a commotion?! He would have been in jail in a second."* But Will didn't need to ask ignorant questions; he understood. The traumatized know what it is to be inert from terror, how hard it is to yank yourself from its grip, how your dreams of running in quicksand from a nefarious enemy become reality when the apparition from your past materializes unexpectedly.

"I could snap your neck, and your life would be over in one immaterial second," Hannibal whispered in Alana's ear, his tone eerily cordial. Someone watching from across the room might even think he was a lover whispering sweet nothings. "I might be apprehended, but I would take you down with me. You could cause a disturbance anyhow, sacrificing your own life for the sake of all the lives I will undoubtedly take in the course of my own, but you won't. You're not that selfless. Are you, Alana?"

Alana didn't say anything, only hardened her gaze as she met Will's eyes.

“Is Margot in attendance this evening as well? Dripping with the Verger fortune as she is, I’m sure she was the reason for the two of you to garner an invitation.”

Alana still didn’t answer Hannibal, eyes darting around the room like prey searching for an escape route. Hannibal’s hand squeezed her arm, cinching the flesh in a bruising grasp.

“*Is…Margot…here?”* Calm and unfettered. Not the voice of a typical fugitive who has just been recognized in a crowded ballroom.

“Yes,” Alana hissed. “She’s outside waiting for me by the car.”

“Then let us all get some fresh air.” Hannibal finally turned his eyes to Will, who merely nodded. It felt like his head was moving in slow motion, bobbing like a puppet on a string. He was on autopilot but wasn’t sure what part of him was at the helm.

Hannibal led, steering Alana by the arm, still careful to make it look like a genial embrace, and Will trailed behind. It struck him how poignant it was that no one around them had an inkling as to what was transpiring. How it was always that way when something devastating or significant in one’s life but insignificant in the grand scheme of the world unfolded. It feels like the world should stop, but it never does.

As they stepped into the cool night air of Paris on the cusp of autumn, Will saw the familiar curves of Margot's back, long hair gracefully framing her shoulder blades as she stood facing the sleek black Citreon. There were a few attendees finishing up cigarettes and heading back inside, but otherwise, this part of the street was quiet. Will didn't need to consult Hannibal to know what was expected of him. Before she could turn around, Will looped an arm around her waist and leaned in close.

"Hannibal has a pretty solid grip on your wife right now. I'm sorry to greet you like this after so long, Margot, but stay where you are."

Margot's eyes widened but otherwise she remained calm. She had always possessed an unsettling ability to remain stoic under pressure. She wouldn't have survived Mason otherwise. Will suspected that quality accounted for most of Hannibal's interest in Margot. Her will to survive and maintain her composure was admirable and appealed to his sense of curiosity, making her an exemplary candidate for the Lecter brand of manipulation.

"I don't believe you," Margot softly intoned, almost sounding bored.

On cue, Hannibal wedged himself between her and the car, tugging Alana with him.

"Oh, that's not where my doubt lies. Will said he was sorry we're meeting like this. I don't believe him." Margot squarely fixed Hannibal with a defiant look.

“I wouldn't question his sincerity, Ms. Verger. This is quite an unexpected turn of events for all parties. I'm sure he thought he would never look upon your lovely face again." Hannibal stared back at her, both of them challenging and unwavering. Alana shifted her eyes to Will's, and there was something pleading, almost desperate there that made him cowardly. He turned his attention away from her and back to Hannibal.

"What do you want?" Margot tilted her head and took a deep breath.

"I propose we all adjourn to my Paris apartment for a nightcap. We're all old friends, and fate has brought us together again. We really should seize the opportunity to catch up," Hannibal said with an ominous smile.

"And why would we ever agree to do that? Especially knowing that you always keep your promises, Hannibal?" Margot kept her gaze steady.

"Indeed I do, but I could easily complete time's circle right here right now." Hannibal clamped a hand over Alana's shoulder, fingers dangerously close to her neck. "Wouldn't you rather extend the evening and see where it leads?"

Margot flashed a smile devoid of warmth and looked over her shoulder at Will.

"Help me into the car, *old friend*?" She mocked. Will's eyes traveled to Hannibal who nodded. Will opened the backseat door and held it open for her. She gracefully ducked inside, and Will followed. Through the partition separating the back and front seats, Will could hear the muffled instructions Hannibal was jovially giving the driving.

"I told Alana if you two were alive, you were together. She didn't believe me. She deludes herself about you. So does Jack. I've never understood why."

Will didn't know what to say to that so he didn't reply, only turned comprehending eyes toward her and swallowed. The door opened again, and Alana slid in next to him. Hannibal got in and closed the door, and Will finally felt the fog clearing, the rush of the unexpected destination of the evening slowing down enough for his emotions to come into view. He desperately wished he could talk to Hannibal alone, ask him what his intentions were, what he was thinking, planning. *What if we're gone longer than anticipated? Can we call someone in the village to check on Winston?* Will huffed at the absurdity of this concern popping up amidst the horrific reality that he might have to kill two women who didn't deserve it, two women he used to count as friends, two women who had a small child waiting for them at home. And then anger bubbled up and strangled that sympathy, anger because these two women were risks to his utopian life with Hannibal, anger that he knew was unjustified. They were going about their lives without anticipating this disruption as well. They hadn't inserted themselves intentionally, and yet still Will found this intense sense of righteousness and betrayal binding itself to his resolve. An instinct to protect at all costs that frightened him and couldn't be allayed.

"You were *kissing.* Hannibal. Lecter." Alana reached for her wine and speared Will with hostile eyes. "Like you're a happy fucking couple."

"That’s exactly what we are, Alana. Does our happiness *upset* you?" Will sighed and took a sip of his bourbon.

"Fuck you," Alana spat, hot tears of rage gathering on her thick lashes.

"What a crude suggestion to make in front of your wife, Ms…Verger? Verger-Bloom? I never asked." Hannibal's lips quirked at the corners as he poured himself a glass of cabernet franc. Alana ignored Hannibal’s question entirely.

"Of course I’m upset. Every ounce of pleasure he’s allowed is a disservice to the rest of the world…and *you*…” Alana shook her head in Will’s direction and bit her lip. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

"Harsh and quite discourteous coming from a former colleague. I wish nothing but the best for you, Alana. I would hope to hear you echo the same well wishes.”

"You and your disingenuous politeness can go to hell."

"Quite the firecracker tonight, aren’t you?" Hannibal unbuttoned his jacket and sat down across from her. "It’s reminiscent of the old Alana. Before I altered the course of your life and made you resilient and poised, your anger was expressed in periodic outbursts of crackling flame. After I left you, your fury was gradually refined into a calm, controlled simmer, the dignified composure of one who has seen and survived many things. One must conclude that the regression to former behavior is due to an elevated state of emotion. You are afraid, and in that fear, you are lashing out, teeth gnashing like a rabid dog struggling to free itself from the tether of the lease."

"And I bet just get off on that, don’t you?" Alana said through gritted teeth, fingers clenched around the stem of her glass.

"Your disrespect is pulling at the edges of my patience, Ms. Bloom." Hannibal's countenance turned stern, the points of his pupils fearsome dots of ink set in deep amber.

"I didn't know...or maybe I didn’t *want* to know." Alana's pitch dropped from anger to despair, and Will sighed. How to begin to explain the inexplicable? He was certain he could read her thoughts. After all, they has been his own many years ago. *After everything he’s done, you’d still go to him?* Although he knew nothing would fully suffice, he opened his mouth to supply some token of explanation. Margot interrupted him.

"I did. Everyone was too focused on the fact that the good doctor wanted to eat him that they didn't stop to consider *how*." Margot delivered the words with that odd deadpan yet singsong quality her voice possessed. Almost like she was chewing each word carefully and watching them as they floated from her mouth one by one. Robotic and chilly.

"I've missed your brass wit, Margot. Always a forked tongue."

Alana's eyes rapidly roamed the room, and in a poorly calculated moment of desperation, threw her glass to the ground behind her and started to run toward Margot. Hannibal was on her in a fraction of a second, effortlessly shoving her back into the chair and injecting her

neck with a syringe he pulled from his jacket in one fluid motion. Will involuntarily winced at the thud and prayed no one noticed.

"Only a paralytic. You will remain conscious and able to hold a conversation although I'm sure – " Margot lunged at his back, the spell of fear broken and the fight or flight impulse engaged. As Will wrenched her away, Hannibal pierced her neck with another needle. The young woman's frame slumped against Will's chest, and Hannibal helped him carry her back to her seat.

“Hannibal, we really need to talk.”

Hannibal straightened his lapels.

“And we will, but first I need to strap them to their chairs. They can no longer support their own weight without aid.” As Hannibal retreated into a dark room behind them, Will watched the vulnerable frames of his former friends sliding awkwardly down the wooden backings, limbs reduced to useless dead weight hanging off the sides. He rushed to Alana’s side, pulling her upward and anchoring her with an arm around her torso.

“Is this your life now, Will? Killing sprees with your psychotic lover?” Alana panted, her body instinctively fighting the drugs flooding her central nervous system.

“Not sprees, no. We’ve only killed one man.” *Why are you telling her this you shouldn’t even be engaging it’s all just going to feel worse if you do.* “Trust me. He deserved it.”

“And you’re fit to decide that? *Hannibal* is fit to be the arbiter of who deserves to live and who deserves to die?”

Just like that, the switch flipped back to anger.

“Why not us?! Who would you have with the gavel in the judge’s chambers? The indiscriminate force of cancer? The presidential power to execute masses of innocent citizens on foreign soil in the name of some erroneous pursuit with the click of a pen?” Will felt possessed, words forcing their way from his tongue before he could think better of it. He heard Hannibal tying up Margot behind him, vaguely aware of her making a retort about whether or not he used these in a very different context.

“Don’t get self-righteous on me,” Alana seethed, eyes unforgiving and hard.

“I’m not self-righteous, Alana. I simply *believe* we allow plenty of unworthy people to have authority they shouldn’t justly have every day. I don’t feel worse than them, and I don’t think Hannibal has any less right to make these decisions than they do.” Will stepped back as Hannibal began to strap her to the chair, the same kind he had used on Will in Italy, and a muddled variance of sympathy and indifference washed over him. It was a storm of internal conflict he wasn’t prepared for and suppressing it was working less and less with every passing moment.

“I don’t…” Will sighed ruefully. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll bite it off?” Margot interjected, alternating her gaze from Will to Hannibal. “Or maybe it’s *you* who should be afraid. You did teach him eevveerryything you know.”

“Margot, can you give me a valid reason why this is *funny* to you?!” Alana shot her wife a disapproving glare for the first time since they had arrived at the apartment. She couldn’t turn her head, but Hannibal had angled Margot’s chair enough for the sidelong glance to be in view. Will wondered if that was an act of cruelty or thoughtful accommodation on his part.

“Panicking won’t get you anywhere with him. You know that.” Tears leaked from Alana’s eyes and spilled down the curves of her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Alana…It’s an old habit.”

A defense mechanism she learned from years with Mason. The air weighed heavy with that unspoken knowledge, and no one said anything for a moment while Hannibal stepped back and assessed his work.

“What is there to *understand*, Will? Truly?” Alana’s eyes flitted back and forth, drug-addled and sluggish.

“I love him, Alana. I have for a long time,” Will whispered, and Hannibal let the beast slip from his posture for a second to look at Will with reassurance and love written in his honey-colored eyes.

“What you have is obsession…fixation…a kind of blind devotion that would warrant legal action were it not reciprocated.” Alana shifted her focus to Hannibal. “He doesn't love you, Hannibal. Emotion produced from stealthy manipulation isn't genuine no matter how much either person wants it to be. You're a psychiatrist, you know this.”

Hannibal’s face twitched imperceptibly, and he leaned in, arms caging her as he gripped the back of the chair on either side of Alana’s head.

“And one cannot draw water from an empty well. You know *this*, Alana.”

“You're not totally sure, are you? You don't know anymore where your psychic driving ended and where his real feelings began.”

“You are not guileful enough for a match of mind games with me, Dr. Bloom. You wife is much better suited to the task. Now, if you will excuse me for a moment, I believe my partner has requested an audience with me.” Hannibal motioned for Will to follow him, and they disappeared into a lavish bedroom Will scarcely had the mental acuity to notice at the moment.

He had planned to address his concerns in a measured tone, the absolute picture of equanimity, but what came out instead was a rattled, borderline hysterical outburst.

“I can’t think I can’t stay calm I can’t BEGIN to tell you the incredible litany of things causing me highly-concentrated, unadulterated stress right now. Why didn’t you…couldn’t we have just *ran?* For all they know, we aren’t residing in France.” Will rubbed his eyes and took deep, gulping breaths. “Tonight wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“I concur. I had envisioned a decidedly different evening for us, but what providence delivers is beyond our control.” Hannibal held Will’s face and forced the younger man to meet his gaze. “Running would not have ended well. They could have had agents waiting at the border for us in no time at all, and Vouvant is a four hour drive away. Slipping into another country with no resources, while not impossible, would have caused us undue hardship. I also made a promise to our dear, brave Alana.”

Hannibal’s past threats to Alana echoed in Will’s memory, and he slipped into suspicion.

“Wait…did you *know* they would be here?” Will’s pupils dilated in dread and anxiety. He tried to curb his incredulity as he waited for Hannibal’s response.

“No. As you saw tonight, the guest list is quite large. It would have been difficult to obtain a complete index of attendees.” He didn’t seem cagey, but Will was still skeptical.

“Knowing you, I doubt it was *that* unattainable. It seems like an awfully convenient coincidence. Our first big outing chosen by *you*, and Margot and Alana just happen to be in attendance. And why did you have syringes at the ready?!”

Hannibal's hands dropped from Will's face, and he gazed back in a probing way that gave Will the phantom sensation of Hannibal's fingers digging at the base of his skull, piercing the flesh and intrusively mining the brain tissue for answers.

“Perhaps your paranoia on this matter is not entirely without basis, but I have been led to believe that we now trust each other and have no need for deceit. So when I tell you again that I was not aware of their presence until the precise moment we laid eyes on Alana, I would ask that you not insult me by refusing to believe it. As for the hypodermics, I have a very helpful compartment in the bar I would be glad to show you.”

Will relaxed somewhat and nodded.

“Okay…Okay, I believe you. The universe has a tendency to make me the punchline of its most perverse jokes so I guess I shouldn’t even be surprised anymore. But Hannibal…I can’t _ ”

Hannibal shook his head.

“I would never force your hand, Will. Especially not in circumstances which I know would draw fresh blood from old wounds.”

"I know. I'm not protesting my own participation. I'm protesting *yours*."

"And what alternative do you propose?" Hannibal canted his head, stiff posture telegraphing an unwillingness to consider whatever Will was going to say.

"We let Bedelia go – "

"Bedelia was under the vigilance of Chiyoh and does not share the same reckless need to best and punish me. Bedelia knows when the war is lost and when it is time to lay the rifle down to retreat with dignity."

"Everyone has an offer they can't refuse. It's only a matter of unearthing it."

"You suggest we allow them to bargain for their lives? Permit them to set the terms?" Hannibal inclined his head skeptically. "Their paltry lives matter that much to you, Will? More than our happiness and safety? What could they possibly have lurking in their arsenal of desperate pleas for their lives that would tempt us?"

"I don't know, but let's wait and see. Think this through." *Instead of an impetuous, hair-trigger response.* "*Please*. Other lives hang in the balance. Why should their son grow up an orphan?"

"Life is cruel. Why shouldn't he learn that as we all do? I did. Do you feel you're better for having been raised by an emotionally absent, neglectful father? Would you have been more inherently flawed, more bankrupt in pathos, if you were alone?"

Will leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

"Now is not the time for posing existential questions, Hannibal."

"Is it not? You wish for me to show mercy. I wish for justification as to why the option is viable. The onus is on you to provide that to my satisfaction." The lines of Hannibal's face stood out in stark relief, shoulders drawn high and tight as he waited for Will to respond.

"They're good parents. Not at all like what I had." Will straightened his posture and walked a few paces closer.

"Are they? What makes you know this beyond the shadow of a doubt? The fact that Alana pitied you when Jack bent your mind and selfishly used you as a disposal object for one purpose and one purpose alone?"

Will began to protest, but Hannibal interrupted.

"Margot asphyxiating her brother with his own pet eel perhaps? Or deceiving you into fatherhood with a bottle of whiskey on a cold night?" Hannibal was austere and clearly not in any mood to entertain other options.

"You thought we would make great parents so clearly an affinity for ruthless violence isn't a disqualification for the job." Will stood his ground. *He wants to verbally duke it out, fine. Game on.*

"And you disagreed so one could argue pacifism *is* a prerequisite for good parenting in *your* mind."

"That's both a cheap shot and a gross over-simplification, and you know it. Besides, this isn't about us."

"Isn't it? Do you remember what I asked you at the cabin?"

"We talked about a lot – "

“Do not be oblique with me. You know very well what I mean.”

Will sighed and wet his bottom lip.

“I told you…I would do whatever was necessary.” Will stepped closer again until they were mere inches apart.

“And were you lying to me?”

“Hannibal, objecting to something you want to do doesn’t mean I would stop you if we can’t compromise. It also doesn’t mean that their lives are more valuable to me than you.” Will swallowed and swept a hand across Hannibal’s cheek. He remained rigid and unyielding to the touch, but Will persisted. “I don’t want another Abigail. Another death to drive a wedge of grudges between us. I know you’ll do what you feel you need to. I’m just asking that you consider other possibilities first.”

“And if I still conclude that ridding the Earth of their existence is the wisest choice?”

“I meant what I said, Hannibal. I won’t interfere. You’re still the most important thing in my life. You always will be.” *But please don’t let it come to that.* Will swept his thumb across the sharp line of Hannibal’s cheekbone, and he softened under Will’s hand, leaning into the palm just a fraction. There was still something feral behind his eyes that Will didn’t trust, but he didn’t have much choice but to wait and see.

“Shall we rejoin our guests?”

Will nodded and stepped aside for Hannibal to exit the room first. Will exhaled heavily, eyes closed as he raked his fingers through his newly shorn hair. A scream pierced his eardrum, shrill yet strangled into a murky, underwater sound from the drugged state of the source, and his head snapped to attention of its own accord. Hannibal held the pointed end of a scalpel to Alana’s neck, the shiny steel so polished and clear that Will could see the reflection of Alana’s ivory neck in the blade. Will approached slowly, each footfall like walking through wet cement.

“You said you would do whatever is necessary regardless of the outcome. What better way to test that theory?” Hannibal’s eyes narrowed, his features wild like the night he killed Abigail. Will knew he had to tread carefully. Negotiating with Hannibal now was as delicate as walking a tightrope.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much to @castellomargot for helping me tweak this chapter, particularly the Alana bits. She's always wanted a Hannigram dance scene, and I loved the idea too so that's how I arrived at the decision to make it happen here. Definitely Google image search that ballroom because it's EPIC.

If you have a super sharp memory, you may recall that the fic this is a sequel to had a scene where Hannibal rather bluntly asked Will if he could kill someone he didn't want to in order to secure their freedom. That's what Hannibal is referencing near the end of this chapter. I may not be good at slow burning sex, but I can slow burn the fuck out of a foreshadowing apparently lol.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> I have returned yet again! I hope at least some of you are still reading now that we're approaching the end! You may have noticed the chapter count no longer has a ? beside it because this is the penultimate chapter. You may want to skim the last one to get a bit of a refresher on where we are in the story. Likewise, feel free to ask me questions if anything is unclear! Comments and kudos give me life, especially since this is the first novel length story I've actually finished writing (a reality that has been equal parts terrifying and elating). :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You can't be serious!" Jack hissed into the phone. He tried to mitigate his rising temper, counting the seconds of his exhalations and inhalations, but the count was becoming less meditative and more frantic with every number. *Onetwothreeonetwothree.* "The prints – "

"Are inadmissible thanks to your recklessness, as usual. You flew to a foreign country with no official sanction from the FBI, utilized resources without official cooperation, interfered with a local investigation on Ivorian soil," Kade Prurnell stopped relentlessly pacing her large, window-framed office and leaned against her desk. "Do you have *any* idea what a messy job untangling this chaos will be? The litigation necessary to hold a *proper* inquiry into it now? All because of what you've done?! You're lucky this hasn't leaked to the press yet. That's exactly what we need – a public panic we can't field questions about because we aren't even privy to the details!"

"You cut me off. You effectively isolated me from all authorized methods, and I *knew* he was still out there. What choice did I have?!" All attempts to lower his voice were abandoned as he slammed the door to his hotel room.

"You never learn, Jack. It didn't work the last time we went down this road, but I don't know what else to do and firing you would invite way too many questions right now." Kade sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, closed her eyes, and took a long breath before speaking again. "You are suspended, effective immediately. I would say I want you on a plane back here, but honestly, Jack? Take this time and go somewhere. Take a *real* vacation, and think about something other than Hannibal Lecter because this obsession isn't benefiting anyone. I don't want to hear from you for a solid two weeks, and when I *do*, it better be from a new, improved Jack Crawford who actually follows procedure and doesn't commit an unauthorized reopening of a closed case across international waters. Am I clear?"

"And what is the bureau going to do about – "

“That’s none of your concern, Jack! Not anymore. I’ll handle it. I’m hanging up now. After I do, you’re leaving the Ivory Coast.” Her directive was firm and without compassion. It was the furthest thing from a debatable suggestion. A loaded silence filled the transcontinental line, and Kade opened her mouth to deliver another round of chastisement.

“Yes. I’ll leave right away.” Jack let out a weighty sigh and sat down on the edge of the stiff, scratchy comforter of the hotel bed.

“Good.”

When he heard the familiar click of the call ending, he hurled the phone into the stale white wall across from him, flakes of old paint crumbling to the carpet from the impact. He didn’t know what would happen if he disobeyed orders. Would Kade be waiting to verify that he bought tickets and boarded a flight somewhere? Did he really care if she did? What was losing a career at this juncture worth to him when he’d already lost so much else?

He needed a plan – goal with clear, defined steps for him to follow. It felt like a tornado had ripped through the center of his agenda, and he was left flailing in the air on a very steep drop to the ground. His window of opportunity to find Hannibal would be closing soon. For all he knew, it already had.

With a heavy heart, he opened the diminutive fridge and took inventory of the tiny liquor bottles. All he could summon the energy for was drawing the shades tight and raiding the minibar. Ripping the cheap metal cap from the top of a mid-shelf whiskey and discarding it on the multi-colored carpet below, he downed the whole thing in one go. Flopping onto the bed, he glanced down at where his phone lay on the ground. He didn’t move to pick it up. All of his problems would still be there in the morning.

With as much dignity and ambivalence as he could muster, Will walked into the kitchen, selected a knife from a wooden block on the counter, tested the deadliness of the tip on the pad of his forefinger, and sucked away the drop of blood that beaded there. The kitchen and dining room were adjoined by an open, high-arched doorway and a large rectangular cutout from the adjacent wall so the chef could lean over the ledge to speak with his guests as he prepped and assembled dinner. Hannibal’s eyes followed Will through these facsimiles of windows, inquisitive but silent.

Will made his way to Margot’s chair and stood behind her, mirroring Hannibal’s stance as he placed the knife’s edge under her jaw.

“If that’s how it has to be, then we do it together.”

“You would relent that easily? Stalwart as you are, I do not know if I can trust that.” Hannibal exhaled sharply through his nose, a dragon ready to breathe smoke. Alana gasped, lips

trembling and eyes squeezed tight as she waited for the inevitable end to arrive. The two women made eye contact across the room, and Margot mouthed 'I'm sorry.' Alana tried to shake her head but only managed an undetectable quiver.

"For you, I would. Sometimes the wrong thing being the right thing to do is too ugly a thought. I've been there…stewing in that mire and in the aftermath. Choosing the 'right' thing didn't leave me whole and unscathed. It left me broken and bereft. I'm not saying I'll recover from this like it was just some perfunctory job, a drone punching in for a mindless day's work. I'm not like you; I can't do that. But that doesn't mean I won't do what's necessary." Will held Hannibal's gaze and prayed that he wasn't visibly sweating. Calling Hannibal's bluff was a perilous wager.

Hannibal scrutinized Will's expression and after a minute that seemed to stretch into infinity, his eyes softened, he nodded, and the muscles of his fingers and forearm loosened. Will knew he was going to lower the scalpel, but Margot, gaze fixed on her spouse, did not.

"Jack knows you're alive," She blurted out as though the leverage of this information had just occurred to her. Hannibal's hand pulled away from Alana's neck, and she sucked in a harsh breath.

Will lowered the knife, and the two men cast meaningful glances above the heads of their potential victims.

"Go on," Will said as he walked around to the other side of the table. Hannibal began to do the same, and they met in the middle, looking out across the table at the pair.

"Margot – "

"Alana, after everything Jack's done…he can't expect another result. Play with hellfire, get burned."

Alana sighed and looked at the floor.

"After the FBI closed the case, he put a bunch of alerts in place with friends overseas. A corpse turned up in the Ivory Coast, and he pulled your prints from a house nearby. He doesn't have anything to link you to the body, but that doesn't really matter…all things considered." Margot looked Will up and down, somewhere between disapproving and indifferent.

"How do you know that?" Alana demanded.

"He called your phone while you were picking up your dress. I answered." Margot didn't look in her direction, maintaining eye contact with Will. "Everyone here knows he's the key to your freedom. Kade and the rest of the FBI want to pretend every sign of the two of you is a hoax, but Jack will never stop. Not as long as he's alive."

"Really?! Bargaining with Jack's *life*? It's starting to be unclear who the villain in this room is," Alana said bitterly, the paralytic wearing off just enough for her to tilt her head in her wife's direction.

“You told Jack to leave it alone. To turn a blind eye, and let it be some other country’s problem. He didn’t listen. He never listens to anyone but himself. We have a *son* to think about, Alana.”

“So our lives are more valuable than Jack’s because of his past lapses in judgment? Then we’re no better than them!”

“People forget the part Jack played in everything! *You* forget. The focus is always on what Hannibal drove Will to do, but what about what Jack drove him to? What about *who* Jack drove him to? I’ve had to make my own decisions about who lives and who dies. You know that. This isn’t a foreign concept to me. *Please* Alana, if you love me and the family we've built together, if you want us to be *safe*, forgive me for doing this.” Margot’s steadfast eyes and the tight corners of her mouth relaxed as she entreated her wife to move her moral goalposts.

Alana closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip. After a deep breath, she opened them again and looked at her partner.

“I will forgive you. It’s obvious that our options are pretty threadbare right now. *Of course* I will forgive you, but I don’t want to be part of this. I don’t want this on my head.”

“I know. It doesn’t have to be,” Margot softly reassured. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Alana whispered, the barest hint of a smile dancing across her lips.

“So who’s going to hold the phone for me? Thanks to you,” Margot slanted her eyes in Hannibal’s direction, “I don’t think my arms are awake enough for that yet.”

Hannibal subtly cast his eyes toward Will to seek his approval.

“This is a compromise I can live with. Margot’s right. He played as much of a part in my becoming as you did, but he never saw me with the love you did.” Margot groaned, and Will ignored her. “I was a means to an end for Jack. It completes the circle, stitches time together with the threads of what should have been.”

Hannibal smiled warmly and laced his fingers with Will’s.

“A wrinkle in time for us to mend. A rare opportunity such as that should not be wasted. The teacup gathering together again.”

“A repeated motif for us.” Will fondly smiled back and excitement began to stir in his belly, thrumming through his body like notes resonating from plucked strings.

“You two would be really sweet if you weren’t so irrevocably fucked up.” Margot screwed up her nose and shook her head.

Hannibal tilted his head and made an amused noise.

“Thank you for the unconventional compliment, Margot.”

Hannibal retrieved her phone from the mantel, selected Jack's number from the contacts, and held the phone up to her ear.

Jack awoke to the shrill ringing of his phone. The ringtone was whatever randomized collection of notes had been designated by the factory setting, and he cursed his ambivalence to personalizing it. The obnoxious tone was extremely unwelcome after a fitful, whiskey-laced nap. He blinked, eyes focusing in the dark as the phone screen lit up, vibrating across the floor as it rang.

He was fully decided on shutting the damn thing off, but when he snatched it from the carpet, the name flashing across the screen gave him pause. Curiosity winning over peevishness, he answered.

"Margot?" Alarm bells sounded in the back of his mind as he spoke. Their last conversation hadn't exactly been amicable.

"How are you doing, Jack?" Her voice was mellifluous and strangely sweet.

"I've had better days, but I've had worse ones too. What do you want, Margot? Don't get me wrong. It's not an unwelcome call but considering you've been protecting Alana from me like a lioness guarding the pride, this isn't exactly status quo."

"Well, I've reconsidered my level of interest since our last conversation. I should be as informed as possible. You were just looking out for us, and I really appreciate that." Margot linked eyes with Hannibal, who was seated uncomfortably close to her, deleterious hands at the ready to strike should she not honor her promise.

"You're welcome, Margot. Alana's like family to me. It's important to me that she's safe. That you both are."

Margot looked at Alana and hoped she couldn't hear Jack's end of the conversation. More guilt about what they were about to set in motion would only complicate things.

"Listen…that's partly why I'm calling."

"Oh?" Jack sat back down on the bed and braced himself for the worst.

"Alana is…she's not doing the best with this news about Hannibal, and I was hoping you might come to France for a little while? She needs a friend who can make her feel safe right now. A friend who understands everything she went through because he went through it too."

Alana opened her mouth to protest, eyes narrowed and blazing, and Will quickly clamped a hand onto her mouth.

“Please, Alana. I know this isn’t ideal, but don’t. say. anything,” Will whispered in her ear. The look she gave him was disheartening and scolding in a maternal way, and Will realized those were aspects of her personality that had always been present. She was the reliable friend who kept everyone in line and set them straight when they strayed onto the wrong path. She knew how to reprimand with the right level of diplomacy to make you realize *why* she was disappointed in you, why you should be disappointed in *yourself*, and how she was only broaching the subject because she wanted you to be the best version of yourself and wanted to help in any possible way. In that moment, Will knew he was right; she was a great mother. He didn’t need further proof of that, and his heart burned a little knowing she had extended those same nurturing instincts to him time and time again. It didn’t make him second guess his choices. It only made him mourn the fact that they would never see eye to eye, and Alana would always view him as someone she failed.

In his hotel room in Abidjan, Jack thought it over. It seemed like a fortuitous chance to fulfill Kade’s wishes, and he hadn’t seen Alana since their doomed meeting to arrange the artifice that led to Hannibal’s release. Besides, France at the end of summer *did* sound pretty appealing. Maybe he would get a taste of early fall foliage and somehow find a way to push away all the hypotheticals crowding his thoughts.

“You know, that actually sounds pretty great. I’m sorry to hear she’s not taking this well though.”

“She’ll be fine. We both know she’s a survivor. I just think it might be a good time to have extra support.”

“I understand, and I agree. Are you at the house in Tours?”

“No, I have an apartment in Paris I use every now and then. I invested in a gallery, and there was a big event for an opening from another colleague so we thought we’d take an extended weekend in the city. Let me give you the address.” Margot's eyes shot up to meet Hannibal's, and he mouthed the address to her.

“Sounds perfect, but…are you sure I’ll be welcomed with open arms?”

“Oh, you’ll be getting *quite* the grand reception. I promise.”

“So when I said I didn't want any part of this, you interpreted that as 'Alana wants to be the bait'?!”

“Well, I couldn’t tell him the truth. FBI cooperation or not, he would have told *someone* Hannibal was here. I couldn’t bank on Jack going rogue vigilante even if he’s most likely ready to. I’m sorry. I really am, but he cares about you. I knew he’d come if I said you

wanted him here." Margot shot her wife a genuinely apologetic look, and Alana rolled her eyes.

"That's sort of the reason it's so distasteful, isn't it? Using his allegiance to me as the lure," Alana's voice trailed off as she shook her head.

"Alana…" Margot instinctively reached out her arms, ready to embrace her partner, forgetting about the restraints until she felt the harsh edge of leather digging into her waist. She turned to Hannibal with her best pliant look. "Now that your special blend of drugs has worn off…Is there any way I can convince you not to leave us strapped here all night?"

Hannibal considered this, expression inscrutable to her as their eyes met, and nodded.

"I believe you are sufficiently aware of the foolishness of tampering with the collateral you have provided," Hannibal walked over to her chair and began untying her, "and I have always found your company to be extraordinarily stimulating, Margot. It would be a shame to waste what little time we have left together. You may remain unrestrained for the rest of the evening, but a sedative for overnight is non-negotiable."

Will followed his cue and did the same for Alana, averting his eyes to avoid any uncomfortable glances.

"Honestly, I think I would insist on it anyway." Will could feel Alana's eyes scorching his back as he turned around. "Don't think I want to be awake waiting for the sun to rise so I can send Jack off to his death. Tell me again how I avoid participation if I'm being kept here against my will until he arrives?"

"There is a back entrance. Tomorrow, Will can escort you outside, and Margot will remain with us to greet Uncle Jack. She will rejoin you after her role is completed. You may wait for her wherever you wish." Will raised his eyebrows at Hannibal, and Hannibal gave him a rather uncompromising *we'll talk about it later* look.

"Oh goody, the gang all together again for one last heist. Someone should take polaroids for posterity." Margot's sarcasm nearly made Will chuckle in the way one does when reality has become too surreal to withstand.

After a strained couple of hours, Margot and Alana fought and eventually made up. Will could hardly blame them; entrusting two serial killers with your wife's well-being wasn't the most dependable situation. Will feigned apathy, and Hannibal circled nearby, a shark ready to bite at the first coppery scent of blood in the water. Alana refused to take her eyes off Will for most of the night, her lovely features almost taunting, broadcasting a sentiment he had difficulty ignoring: *If this is what you've become, if this is what you're going to do to me, at least grant me the courtesy of LOOKING at me while you do it. Don't turn away in cowardice. Own what you are. Own the decisions you've made that brought you here.* True to

their word, the women allowed Hannibal's medical cocktails to saturate their bloodstreams once more before they retired to the guest bedroom.

As he laid down in an unfamiliar bed, Will felt a deep ache in the marrow of his bones. His muscles throbbed as though the day had been spent completing a triathlon, every mental conflict of the previous hours manifesting in his body, etching its way into his skin like the searing metal of a brand. Hannibal draped his arm over his stomach and pulled Will's back to his chest, knees slotting into the back of the younger man's as they embraced.

"Talk to me, darling Will." Even under the taxing conditions, Hannibal's smoky drawl soothed Will a little, and he found himself relaxing into his lover's arms. "How are you feeling?"

"How do you think I'm feeling?" Will exhaled a careworn sigh and pressed his face into the pillow. There was a pause, and the city was suspiciously quiet around them, so much so that Will wondered if he was imagining it, blocking out all the external din and replacing it with the white noise buzzing in his skull.

"Conflicted. Guilty yet powerful. Righteous but undeserving. A bundle of contradictions that is natural given the circumstances..." He paused, and Will felt the rhythm of Hannibal's breathing reverberating through his back. "Are you angry with me?"

The candor of the question was unexpected. There was no hint of ulterior motive in it.

"I don't hold your standards against you. I know we've talked about that before, but…after what happened back there, I want to make sure that's clear." Will turned around in Hannibal's arms until they were facing each other, taking in the sight of his shining eyes in the darkness. "I'm not angry."

"Part of me was disappointed that you did not want to kill her for what she did to me. She took such pleasure in my confinement…the elated agent of all indignities I suffered." It came out hoarsely, and Will's chest tightened as he pulled Hannibal closer.

"I hate thinking about the years you spent in there, but…she was only doing what she thought she had to do to protect herself and her family. I can't fault her for that any more than I can fault you for having different standards about the value of life. She can't ever see you the way I do. Besides, haven't *I* done much worse to you?"

"You know that is not a comparable set of events. I would let you break and mend me, remake me into anything you wished as long as you stayed by my side." Hannibal laughed softly and kissed Will's lips. "I thought I grasped the full extent of what you meant when you said we had come so far…how is it possible I feel like this? If I had taken her life, the rush of authoritative fulfillment would have only left me cold moments later. The need to be the facilitator of final judgment upon her and others like her has come to mean a great deal less to me than your happiness."

"Me. *Us*. That's how it's possible." The answer was simple and succinct but encompassed everything nonetheless.

“Has seeing Alana damaged your view of yourself?” And just like that, the softness receded. Hannibal’s tone was even, but there were menacing spikes around the edges.

“No…I hate that Alana has gotten this window into our life, but it’s not about her disapproval transforming my sense of self. It’s more that I would prefer she didn’t have to know…that she could hold intact the illusion of whatever version of me she thought died on that cliff. She’s been through enough.”

“The dissolution of the illusory is what separates the naïve from the wise. It is necessary for growth and the acquisition of armor against the horrors and disenchantments of life.”

“I think Alana is pretty well-armored after the life she’s had.”

“And Uncle Jack? Are you indecisive about his fate? You were quick to accept the indemnity Margot offered.”

“It wasn’t smoke and mirrors when I said all those years ago that I wanted him to know. There’s the spiraling force of an idea stretching its spidery hands within me until I’m consumed.” Will stroked Hannibal’s arm and traced the jut of his collarbone. “When she said it, I knew she was right…He won’t stop so I see no reason why we shouldn’t stop *him*.”

“You do not hold him in contempt exactly, but you are convinced of the necessity of his death…and you are not troubled by what you may have once thought of as a detestable situation.”

“Yes…I don’t feel the painful tug of empathy for him that I feel for Alana and Margot…I haven’t for a while if I’m being honest. Not since we parted ways after your trial.”

“It is doubtful that he will be the only individual in tenacious pursuit throughout our lives. While it solves an immediate dilemma, it does not change the reality of our chosen path.”

“By the time anyone realizes he’s missing, we’ll be long gone. The Ivory Coast will be the last known trace of us, and every adversary will be back to the drawing board, poring over mountains of anonymous tips that will be ninety-nine percent spurious wastes of time. They’ll be exhausted by the lack of progress and more pressing concerns will replace bureau resources once again. There will be new killers preying on the innocent and posing a more imminent threat to the FBI. They’ll be scrambling for justification for the manpower devoted to the search for the Baltimore pair that slipped through their hands months, years ago. Not to mention how much Kade will want to detract from the FBI's overt failure to protect Jack and arrest us. That isn’t to say we won’t be spotted again and have to return to moving often until it dies down, but I know by now that you’re very adept when it comes to that.” Will saw the corners of Hannibal’s mouth upturning, and the city street lights streamed in from the window to cast shadows on his face until the smile was nearly unnerving. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“I am not sure what you’re implying, Will.” Hannibal kept on smiling and stroked Will’s stomach, fingers dipping beneath the hem of his t-shirt. Will rolled his eyes and turned back around to face the window.

“You were testing me when you asked about Jack. Wanted to see if I’ve absorbed your calm logic, and now you’re grinning like I’m your star pupil.” Will laughed and squeeze the arm that was wound around his waist.

“You are. Among a great many other things of course.” Hannibal kissed the space behind his ear.

“So are you. Margot thinks you stopped because of her proposition, but you decided to lower the scalpel before then.”

“I saw it all going away. Your trust in me, in us. Your forgiveness. Swirling down a storm drain like so much relentless rain sliding down pavement.” Hannibal’s hushed confession filled the room, and Will’s heart swelled. He shifted again until they were face to face and kissed him hard, lips crushing and bruising until their eyelids grew heavy and their limbs relaxed into sleep.

Despite her protests about involvement in this sordid arrangement, Alana elected to remain near the back stoop until Margot rejoined her. Will reminded her that she would be within earshot should anything go awry, and she cut him off with a glare. “I’m not sitting in a café trying to project some image of normalcy while she’s here with you. I want to know immediately if something happens. I still don't trust you. I need to be able to save her.” Will nodded solemnly and made no more attempts to sway her.

The back door led to an arresting cobblestone street, the kind travel magazines would print to depict the allure of Parisian life, the quaintness of the legendary city. A couple people ambled by, but otherwise it was nearly deserted. It wasn’t a surprise that Hannibal had chosen an apartment in a quiet neighborhood, but the juxtaposition of the stillness and what was about to happen cast an ominous mood over these moments.

Alana and Will stood outside in the temperate air, a mild breeze rustling the precious few leaves that had fallen, foreshadowing what was to come of their brethren in the following months. It was an endurance test of who would cave. In the end, she was the one to dispel the tension, and Will supposed that was appropriate. Hannibal would disagree, but Will had always believed her to be the braver of the two of them.

“It’s hard to know what to say. Still, I feel compelled to say *something.* I’m probably never going to see you again, and if I *do*, we’ll have to pass like ships in the night pretending we don’t know each other.” She smiled for the first time, and it was like a magnificent creature coming out of hibernation, stretching its iridescent wings in the first light of spring. Alana had a whole spectrum of different smiles, and this particular one had always been Will’s favorite. It was shaded in conspiratorial mischief, eyes that shared unspoken secrets across the room the way friends might silently critique someone they found frivolous or annoying. It was fond and felt inclusive and had always comforted Will in those days when he struggled

to feel included and welcome anywhere, but it didn't warm him anymore. It was pleasant and benevolent, but they were both so far removed from who they used to be, both to themselves and to each other, that it felt more like an exercise in muscle memory, the brain relying on repetition of learned behaviors, replaying a common social scenario on autopilot to put the other party at ease. It was a nice gesture, an appreciated one, but hollow nevertheless. "Tell Hannibal I want France."

Will laughed at that, and there was no malice in it.

"I can just hear him now. 'Egotistical of her to lay claim to a whole self-governing body whose ownership has been passed through many historically significant hands as far back as the Iron Age.'"

"You *completely* butchered his accent, but the dialogue is spot on." Alana joined in on the laughter but abruptly stopped, adopting a more somber timbre when she spoke again. "I'm not saying forever. Just for now. He's not the only one rebuilding a family."

"Generous of you," Will quietly uttered.

"To banish him from the land of unpasteurized cheese and fine wine?" Alana cocked a puzzled eyebrow.

"No…to call me his family even though…" Will sucked in a breath and drew his bottom lip into his mouth. "Even though things are…the way they are between all of us. Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm normally more coherent than this."

"Stress is known to reduce verbal fluency."

"Well, now *you* sound like Hannibal." Will offered her a wry smile, and she returned it.

"You *are* his family. As pathological as your addiction to each other is, he does love you. As much as he can love anyone. No person in Hannibal's life has gotten more sincerity and transparency from him than you. It sounds warped to say you've been a positive influence on him because he's still a *psychopath,*" She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut as if she couldn't quite believe she was vocalizing such a ludicrous idea, "but…Margot thinks he stopped because of the information she gave him. I felt the press of the blade relax before then. He looked at you, and he didn't want to defy you. He heard what you said, and he took it into account rather than selfishly doing what he wanted."

Will nodded and looked at his feet, unsure how to match her gaze. He didn't feel like he deserved her kindness right now. Such a strange dichotomy, feeling completely sound in your life choices yet unable to ignore your empathy for those who are harmed by them and fervidly disapprove of them. He was close and removed from her all at once.

"The night he cut me in his kitchen…I knew I had changed him, but I couldn't have imagined just how much."

Alana's eyes roved over his face and assessed the situation before taking a gamble.

“Will, a change in someone like him doesn’t mean – ”

“Don’t.” Will held up his hand. “Can we just...not? Please?” *Don’t try to reach the unreachable, Alana. You’ll only disappoint us both.*

She swallowed and nodded.

“I hope you have a wonderful life, Alana. I really do.” He cautiously raised his head, azure eyes meeting the paler blue of hers. Her eyes began to brim with tears that she rapidly blinked away.

“It doesn’t make sense…I should be *glad* to never see you again. I shouldn’t feel…whatever the hell this is.”

Will chuckled softly.

“I know. It’s complicated.”

“Understatement of the century.”

“Farewell hug?”

Alana’s face lit up in surprise. She didn’t answer for a moment.

“Yeah…I think I’d like that.”

They hugged, arms loose and uncertain at first until they gave way to the paradox of the moment and tightened their embrace. Will tilted his head, eyes slanting as he pulled away.

“Were you *really* surprised we’re together now?”

“No…” Alana admitted. “Like I said, I think it was more that I didn’t want to believe you *would*…after everything.

“I wonder how obvious it’s been to everyone who knew us. I – ”

Alana interrupted him with a clipped laugh. Her pitch dipped lower as she delivered one final impish grin.

“I hate to be the bearer of information Will Graham is oblivious to, but it’s not exactly headlining news. Maybe the fact that you’ve succumbed to it is, but it’s been hanging in the ether for a long time. Certainly from Hannibal’s end.”

“God, if word spreads from the FBI to Freddie Lounds, am I going to be reading a prevalent refrain of ‘everyone knew it except Will himself’? I’m embarrassed about how long it took me to figure out he was in love with me.”

“Well, if there’s anyone more oblivious than you, it’s Jack. I doubt it occurred to him until he found himself face to face with irrefutable evidence.”

The atmosphere grew quiet again as they both contemplated the sober context of that statement. It wouldn't be long before they wouldn't have to speculate anymore about Jack's reaction to the nature of Hannibal and Will's relationship.

Margot sauntered outside, alone.

"Showtime, murder husband."

Will didn't know what to say so he only nodded. He shifted his weight from foot to foot as Margot kissed Alana and whispered reassurances. They walked back inside together, leaving a worried Alana behind.

"It was…interesting," Margot rolled the word around on her tongue with a satirical lean, "to see you again, Will. I hope you won't be offended if I say I hope it doesn't happen again anytime soon."

"Not at all. I hope the same. I doubt we'll have the chance to say this since I'll be…occupied when you slip out so I'll say it now. Goodbye, Margot."

It was supposed to be a swift, effortless act. They were supposed to blindside Jack from behind as Margot rounded the corner of the foyer and into the living room, but these things don't always go according to plan and Jack possessed none of the witlessness or physical torpidity that were Hamish's sparkling personality traits. Jack was trained. Jack was alert. Jack was much like a beast crouched on a tree branch surveying a wide breadth of territory with beady eyes and snapping jaws.

They were hoping to catch him off guard as he arrived to presumably enjoy the company of old friends, but the knowledge that Hannibal was alive had raised his hackles. He was seeing shadows out of the corners of his eyes everywhere he went, specters of foreboding that took the shape of Hannibal before evaporating in the time it took to turn his head. This time it wasn't a projection of his anxiety, no trick of the imagination. His pupils registered the brief blur of black with the smallest widening, that biological shift to funnel in more light, adjusting to the darkness of the image to gain more focus until he realized it was indeed the figure of Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal caught Jack's arm as he spun around and reached for his gun, shoving Jack's elbow into the wall as the gun clattered to the ground along with Hannibal's syringe. What Jack failed to detect was the presence of a second individual emerging from the other side. By the time he noticed Will, it was too late.

Will slung his arm around Jack's neck, the fingers of his hand clamping around his opposite wrist to tighten the chokehold. Jack lurched backward with all his weight, and Will began to pitch back as well, jerking on feet that threatened to uproot and tumble them to the floor.

Jack's foot connected with Hannibal's stomach, but Hannibal grasped the ankle as it did, twisting in a fluid motion. As Jack roared and slackened his grip on Will's arm, Hannibal scooped up the syringe from the floor and placed it between his teeth as he dodged a flailing kick from Jack's uninjured leg. Jack's eyes darted around as he tried to determine where to devote his energy, what possible move he had left to utilize. His teeth came down hard on Will's arm, and Will shrieked, calling on all of his self-control to ignore the pain and not allow his grip to loosen. But unfortunately, automatic physical reactions betrayed him, overriding his mental resolve, and he felt his arm slip an inch or so away from Jack's neck. Jack drew in a ragged breath, but Will yanked his wounded arm back with the hand still clamped around his wrist, securing his hold on Jack's throat once again.

With Jack's focus on Will, Hannibal saw an opening and took it, sliding behind the two of them with the grace of a panther on the hunt. The syringe pierced the fabric of Jack's shirt, the sharp point breaking the skin of his shoulder as Hannibal pressed the plunger down. It didn't take effect right away, and the tautness of Will's arm around his neck couldn't hold when teeth punctured skin once again. Will yelled and dropped his arm enough for Jack to truly break free this time and land a punch to his jaw. Will reeled backward and fell into the coffee table, the pointed edge digging into his shoulder. Wincing, he rose and stalked toward Jack. Jack's back was to him, but now he was hobbling, his weight leaning on his good ankle as he swiped at Hannibal. Hannibal bided his time, elegantly dodging instead of striking, conserving energy and waiting for the medicine to activate and render Jack's struggle useless. It didn't take long. Jack's coordination grew choppy like a short-circuiting animatronic. Hannibal panted, catching his breath as he circled Jack from a cautious distance.

"Your limbs are sending signals to the brain to move, but the brain has forgotten how. Your muscles will stutter in their futile attempts only a moment longer before you collapse."

Will paced around him as well, making eye contact with Hannibal, the same telepathic predator exchange passing between them as it had on the night they slew the Red Dragon. A few seconds later, Jack fell to the ground, and Will couldn't stop the sinister smile that made its way across his lips.

"Hello, Jack."

"Hello, Will. History coming back around to draw the circle closed. I suppose your partner-in-crime thinks that's poetic." The injection was the same Hannibal had used for Margot and Alana, designed to paralyze but keep him coherent. Jack looked back and forth between the two men. "I hear you two are an item now."

"Do I detect a note of homophobia, Jack?" The corners of Hannibal's lips tugged upward, a smile unsettling in its whimsy.

"You know that's not what this is about." Jack's eyes narrowed in pure spite.

“Oh, I don’t know...masculine archetype that you are, bellowing agent of law and order as appointed by society’s hierarchy...it isn’t unreasonable to suspect you have limitations when it comes to sympathizing with the LGBT community.” Hannibal was toying with him with perverse glee, and Will couldn’t help but grin. He no longer attempted to deny that the sight of Hannibal like this was always arousing.

“The only *community* you two belong to is each other,” Jack spat, alternating his gaze between the two standing before him.

“He’s not wrong.” Will turned to Hannibal with a shrug and slipped his hands in his pockets as he strode closer. Hannibal only smiled.

“I suppose your bitterness can be attributed to the mourning of your former protégé. A lost cause you refused to believe was truly lost, only now you are confronted with the incontrovertible reality.”

“If you’re going to kill me, maybe we can just skip the witty repartee. We’ve already been here a few times, after all. I don’t see a reason to repeat the scene.” Jack sighed wearily, eyelids fluttering from the drugs.

“So stoic…If you really cared, wouldn’t you be scrambling in your bag of tricks to reach me?” Will’s own acid tongue took him by surprise. He hadn’t taken the time to wallow in his resentment for Jack in a while. He was far too concerned with other matters these days, but if there was ever a time to let it all out, it was now, with Jack bound and weary before him. “Cajoling me with the promise of what’s behind door number three if I leave this life of sin behind?”

“You’ve been unreachable for a long time, Will.”

“You know, it could be argued that you exerted your influence over me every bit as much as Hannibal. You just felt your cause was more virtuous.”

“I did. I was wrong. I’m not too proud to admit that.”

It stilled Will’s pulse to hear how drained of fight Jack was. Will subdued the empathy he felt bubbling around his anger, astonished by how easy it was. Even after all his insisting to Hannibal that he’d learned to separate others emotions from his own, pick up on what he wanted without getting invested, without falling inside himself, sucked in like a helpless leaf in the vortex of the wind, he still wasn’t sure it would work when it came to people he knew intimately. But he’d been tested twice in twenty-four hours and was pleased to see the scales tipping in his favor.

“See, I don’t know if that’s true, Jack.” Will stepped forward and pulled a chair near to him. He sat down and leaned forward. “If it were, I can’t imagine that you would so callously pressure me into coming back. Knowing *everything* that happened, you showed up at my cabin in the woods like you had learned *nothing*.”

“It wasn’t a careless decision. I – ”

“You were self-serving. *Always*. You pushed me right into his arms, Jack. You have more culpability in this union than maybe anyone else.” Hannibal observed but hung back, patiently waiting to see where this was headed.

“I haven’t forgotten. I never will.” Jack swallowed the lump of regret mounting in his throat.

“Well…you don’t have much time left to live with that weighing heavily on your conscience so feel free to absolve yourself. Besides, I really should be thanking you. If it weren’t for your persistence in recruiting me, I wouldn’t have met the only person who has ever truly understood me. I just wanted you to know how integral you were to the plot.” *I know how much that will singe every chamber of your heart, Jack.*

“Because you wanted to be the one to twist the knife already lodged in my gut.” Jack read his mind, his breathing labored. A strangled, guttural noise rose from the depths of his throat. Frustration laced with surrender.

“Exactly. I know it’s the last thing you want to hear so I will gladly remind you. I’m happy and free, Jack. I'm exactly as I was *meant* to be.” Will didn’t have to turn around to know Hannibal was smiling. “Now tell me...how would you like to die, Jack?”

Chapter End Notes

As always, a thank you to @castellomargot for beta-ing. I particularly need that in these later chapters since I want to make a proper ending that does the whole journey justice! And a thank you to everyone who has read any and all portions of this story. It means the world to me. I'm not sure when the final update will be as I want to make sure it is edited and polished. It is coming though, and I hope you'll stick around for it!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> Oh man...here it is. The final chapter in the Hannigram story that has been a part of my life for a year and a half. My apologies for the delay, but it was very important to me to have this properly edited and polished for all of you. I needed the ending to be as satisfying as possible! Alright, I'll save the rest of my reverence for the end notes so you can get to it. :) Comments are EXTRA appreciated on this one because finishing this means so incredibly much to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There’s no end to this sick game, is there?” Jack roared.

“It’s not a trick question. We can’t display you. Your death can’t be flamboyant. It’s a practical decision. A necessary one.” Hannibal observed Will with intrigue. He always reveled in the unforeseen directions life took, and this was no exception.

“Nothing personal?” The vitriol dripped from Jack’s mouth like a gunpowder trail ready to ignite.

“Oh, I think your departure from this life is rife with overlapping benefits for Will. For myself as well. It can be vital while also quenching the thirst for closure. One does not negate the other. I would go as far as to say they are inextricably linked.” Hannibal took a few steps forward until he was behind Will, protectively resting his hand on the younger man’s shoulder.

“And what about you, Dr. Lecter? What purpose does my death serve for you?”

“Those pleasures are not for your ears, Jack. Nor would they offer much solace. I believe you have come to understand that my motivations do not align with anything you can pin beneath the pad of your thumb and preserve under glass for safe keeping.”

Jack laughed joylessly.

“Doublespeak until the end.”

“I am concise as any if one pays proper attention.”

Will bit back a smile.

“Do you think you won’t end up like this too, Will? Tied to some chair as it sinks in that you’ve been your own undoing this whole time?”

“Moral relativism, Jack. What might be a capital sin on your moral gauge is a minor infraction on the scale of another. Hannibal and I have sifted through the rubble of our earthquakes. We know where we stand with each other.”

Jack took a deep inhale and closed his eyes.

“The way Bella almost went…before you revived her.” He opened his eyes and stared at Hannibal, looking through him. “That’s how I’d like to go.”

Will swiveled his head to gaze up at Hannibal. Hannibal met Will’s eyes before addressing Jack’s request.

“I believe I can approximate that.”

“It feels too much like dialogue from a hackneyed noir to ask if you have any last words. Yet I find myself wondering what to say, what verbal finality to give our relationship.” Will pressed the plunger on the syringe and met Jack’s eyes, his hands as steady as a surgeon and no whispers of doubt polluting the moment. Will’s resolution was solid, roots planted deep and spread through the soil over time, staking their claim so far into the Earth that excavation was impossible. Chop one vine-like network and a new one would appear in its stead, stronger and more obstinate than its predecessor. There was no possibility for reversion nor did Will want there to be. And as he gazed into Jack’s eyes, he saw that he knew this to be true. Jack was *seeing* him with unclouded vision as he hadn’t so many years ago.

“All the finality we need is currently making its way through my veins.” Jack closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I hope you’re happy, Will. I think I mean that. Although I can’t spare one fucking drop of concern for Hannibal’s enjoyment of life.”

Will laughed, and much to his shock, Jack joined in.

“I love him, but…I can’t say I blame you.”

“Then again, I guess his quality of life is forever linked to yours, isn’t it? You’re no longer separate entities.” Jack’s eyelids fluttered as the drugs took hold, a faint, wistful smile appearing on his lips. “A hivemind…you’ll probably die together…in some ways, I think you both already have.”

“Yes…” Will whispered. “In some ways, we already have. Goodbye, Jack.”

“Goodbye, Will,” Jack rasped. His fingers uncurled, the muscles going slack as the life left him, departing from his chest in invisible clouds to whatever awaited him. Will imagined swirls of blue and green light twining together and ascending to some unknown place, lighting the way like a celestial map. Will didn’t believe in an afterlife, didn’t find the same comfort in the idea of it that most did. To him, it felt more like a trap to be beholden to the

legend of heaven or a cautionary tale of hell. It was a waste of time to spend the entirety of this life amassing an unknown score of points toward purchasing a spot in some mysterious unearthly land. It was hard enough to survive in this life without fretting about the next, but he believed Jack was the type to be sentimental in the end. After all, he had requested to die like Bella. Will assumed he was hoping to be reunited with her in some way, to receive some compensation for the adversity of this life.

Jack's eyes closed one last time, and his hands hung limp at his sides. It was strange to see. He looked peaceful, asleep but ready to spring back to life at any moment. Will was struck by the irony of his confrontation with Jack ending not with a bang, but with a whimper, a slow draining of life as quiet as a rose petal tumbling to the floor.

Hannibal's warm hand clamped down on his shoulder, dispelling the reverie.

"Are you alright, Will?"

"Yeah…" Will turned his head and looked up at his partner. "Yes, I'm fine. It feels…less important than I'd imagined. Less monumental. A simple turn of events that was foretold and compulsory. Desultory almost."

He remembered a question of Abigail's that Hannibal had relayed to him, a question posed in the aftermath of Nicholas Boyle. *Does that make me a sociopath?*

"Is carnage and strife necessary for satisfaction? Do conditions of hardship give meaning to the accomplishment of finally bringing about Jack's end? Or do you simply miss the intimacy of violence?"

"The latter." Will's forehead creased, revelation taking hold. "The primal lure of watching you tear out another man's throat with your bare teeth is…compelling. I didn't realize how much I needed to see it again until now."

Hannibal smiled and cupped Will's cheek.

"Your becoming has been described by some in such a way as to imply a beginning, a middle, and an end. Those around you have perceived different points along the timeline of your evolution to be categorical conclusions, but no such conclusion exists. You are ever-changing, morphing into new forms yet not entirely discarding the outer shell of your previous incarnation. Each time, you absorb a portion of your last chrysalis, retaining and refining new aspects of your nature as well as those that have been present for all time. You are an unflaggingly unique and beautiful creation of your own. What you accomplished so flawlessly today will join the vast catalogue of Will Graham's experiences, but it is not the punctuation at the end of a sentence. It is a tributary in a limitless body of water, the stream never pausing, never stuttering, no matter what impediments may be present in its path."

"We still don't fully know what kind of killer I am, do we?" Will smiled as he stood and covered Hannibal's hand with his own.

"Indeed. Various facets have made themselves known, but your brutality continues to evolve. Every kill will unearth new levels of comprehension. Preferences and dislikes will emerge in

greater specificity each time."

"I prefer bloodshed to the quiet faltering of a gradual death. There is…poetry in the chorus of gasps and unpredictable streams of blood painting the walls, artful glory in the ensuing mess. A sense of triumph from being the agent of it, the orchestrator of horrific sights and sounds, deciding when to lift your arms to usher in the crescendo." Arousal coursed through him, and he could tell that Hannibal felt it. Smelled it, tasted it, and reflected it back. Hannibal licked his lips and pulled Will to him, devouring his mouth and holding him close in a crushing embrace.

"My beautiful, extraordinary Will." Hannibal broke the kiss, breathless and tugging the hair at the base of Will's neck. "I could spend the rest of our lives inventing new ways to tell you how very much I love you, but it would never be enough."

"I know. I know." Will kissed him again, flooded with the desire to have him right there and then while full well knowing there wasn't time. "I love you so much."

Will pulled back enough to look into his amber eyes.

"Is it egotistical to feel as though I gave him some level of peace he couldn't give himself? I alleviated him of his obsession, a drive that left no possibility of closure."

"Not at all. Many would disagree and find it a disturbing notion, but the perturbing nature of an idea does not negate its veracity. There are many avenues of thought one might stroll down in the aftermath of death. I have always found it to be a missed opportunity not to choose the walkway of optimism. There is always hope to be sprung from tragedy."

Will smiled tenderly and threaded his fingers in Hannibal's hair.

"My Hannibal…ever the hopeful existentialist."

Hannibal opened his mouth, but Will put a finger to his lips.

"Don't start dissecting the definition of existentialism and giving me the reasons it's a reductive title for your much more nuanced philosophy. More pressing matters demand our attention."

Vouvant was as still as a graveyard at this hour. A few birds had risen to sing from their perches in the trees dotting the backyard and extending into the forest, the gentle trickle of a nearby brook faint against the whistle of wind stirring the sparse bed of leaves blanketing the ground. The copse they had chosen as Jack's final resting place was thick and overgrown, and Will's eyes were trained to the early morning darkness. They were both alert, working quickly but careful to pause often to take inventory of any activity in the wooded area. It was a very simple burial. Traditional in an ancient way. All that was missing was a pine box.

When they finished, the blue-black darkness was shaded by an expanding white glow, lightening into a deep lapis. Will's gaze roamed over the surrounding trees, curved branches forming a jagged half-oval around Jack's grave. They had taken painstaking care to reconstruct the grass atop the mound, transplanting a few flowers and wild plants from nearby, an incidental decorative display only designed to deflect. Will was amazed at how natural it looked. Nothing amiss, nothing of note.

By the time Jack would be reported missing, weeks would have passed. Margot and Alana had alibis as they were in attendance at a gallery opening at the time of his death. The story they had agreed upon was that Margot had invited Jack to the event, but he had declined. Said that he needed some time alone to think, to forget about Hannibal and what had happened with Kade Prurnell. Part of Will still worried they might betray them, but the protective instinct of motherhood was a powerful force and if they waited too long…they wouldn't have immunity from prosecution any more than Hannibal and Will. Jack's body was buried four hours away from Paris in a sleepy little town that the police would have no reason to investigate.

Granted, this didn't relieve them of suspicion. The fact that Jack disappeared while investigating Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter would add a rather obvious grim connotation to the incident. Kade and the FBI would eventually figure out how to extract the evidence from the Ivory Coast through legal, above board channels. But all of this would take time and effort, affording the two of them a good head start they didn't intend to squander.

"Do you have any more hideouts you haven't made me aware of?" Will sat on the couch in front of the fireplace, clean and dry after his shower and relieved to be near Winston again. The dog sat on the cushion next to him, front paws propped up on Will's thigh.

"I am afraid we have reached the end of my cache of dwellings in this part of the world. I own one more house, but its placement in the Western hemisphere is precariously close to Baltimore." Hannibal stoked the fire, adding another log and repositioning the kindling with a fire iron. He sat down next to Winston and turned his eyes to Will. "Have you any preferences for a destination after we leave Vouvant? There was mention of moving deeper into Europe."

Will watched the tongues of flame licking at the logs in the fireplace and debated whether or not to raise the question he had been mulling over.

"Have you given any thought to going home?"

Hannibal cast Will a sidelong glance, the nature of which Will had trouble determining.

"Taking up residence in a castle with extensive grounds that bear my name isn't exactly inconspicuous."

“Hiding in plain sight is a habit of yours. It has the benefit of being remote and unmonitored in a way few places are. No arrangements would have to be made since it belongs to you, and I get the feeling there are many hidden corridors and pockets to disappear in. I’m not saying we stay forever, but…there’s something I left there that I think you might like to see.” Will turned toward him, hopeful that this would pique Hannibal’s interest. Discussing his evolution as a killer had produced this itch to show him the rung on the ladder he had missed, the winged prisoner Will couldn’t rationalize away, not even then. Choosing to display him had been a turning point for Will regardless of whether or not he had embraced it and allowed the realization to take hold at the time. There had been no evident reason to do it. It fulfilled no *need*, no requirement beyond Will’s repressed desire to make his own tableau worthy of Hannibal’s praise.

Beyond that, Will’s curiosity about Hannibal’s own past development continued to be ceaseless. While he did not wish to trigger Hannibal or be responsible for coercing him into the eyes of past storms he had long discarded, regret would take hold if he didn’t at least ask.

“And what might that be?” Hannibal’s voice held a hint of warning, but there was interest there. He held Will’s gaze as he waited for a response.

“Chiyoh’s prisoner. The man you told her killed Mischa. I made him into a dragonfly, wings of debris and broken glass framed by twigs, his limbs bound to form a segmented abdomen, snails feasting on his flesh. I hoisted him above the well in the stone basement that had been his cell, his only reality for decades.”

“Chiyoh never mentioned your display.” The corners of Hannibal’s lips drew up, his eyes sparkling with wonderment and love.

“I’m not sure if she knew. She disappeared up the stairs, and I found myself alone with the evidence of her kill. I didn’t plan it, I just…I picked up a branch and the fragments of the broken bottles, and I was driven, haunted by the image that formed and wouldn’t be silenced until it was brought into being.” Will’s voice was hushed and reverent, his head filled with sensory memories of green and brown sharp-edged triangles scraping against the callouses of his sail-rough fingers, cold sweat forming on his brow in the clammy basement, the snails that were more pliant than expected as he gently plucked them from their cochlear gardens, the swell of contentment as he raised the ropes and his creation’s glimmering wings expanded. He remembered wishing he could see the glass resplendent in the sunlight, glowing like the fireflies gliding through the sky on the Lecter grounds.

“Why haven’t you shared this before?” Hannibal sounded curious, not scolding.

“So much has happened…I don’t know that I thought of it as important until now. I *want* you to see it…if you’re willing. I know it’s hard for you to – ”

“We’ll go.”

“Really?” Will smiled and took each of Hannibal’s hands in his own.

“I cannot say how well the grounds of the Lecter estate will receive me nor how well I may receive them, but I consider this a very worthy impetus for the journey.”

Will climbed into Hannibal's lap and kissed him deeply. Hannibal gripped his hair at the root and bit his bottom lip, drawing a gasp from Will.

"I wanted to impress you. I think somehow I was still *courting* you, a subconscious response to your gesture, your broken heart in the Norman Chapel. *God*, I wish I'd kissed you in front of the Botticelli. I wanted to. Wanted to lay my head on your shoulder and heal together. Do you think you would have let me?" Will combed his hands through Hannibal's hair and looked into his intense eyes.

"I do not know what I would have done. It would have been a disarming act of affection, and I was so stubbornly determined at that moment, so convinced that I knew the inevitable end to our story and could not alter it. How terribly, tragically wrong I was." Hannibal smiled and leaned his forehead against Will's.

"How wrong we both were," Will breathed as he buried his face in Hannibal's neck.

"Welcome home, Dr. Lecter."

They stood in front of the heavy gate that bore the Lecter family crest, and Will watched Hannibal for any signs of discomfort. He appeared composed, standing tall and sophisticated in his lightweight overcoat. The air was dense with the morning dew of early Autumn, fog obscuring the grounds and creeping around the trees in winding patterns like a misty snake hissing words of foreboding, water vapor expelled from its moist tongue. There was something enchanting about the disrepair of the estate, the vines binding themselves around the spires of the gate and the walls of the castle. The whole area lent itself to the realm of fairytales. The original stories that preceded the anesthetized ones, the tales that were composed of gore and betrayal and monsters and misfortune, the kind that ended in death and decay instead of morality and rescue. Will was very aware that Hannibal's own history with this place mirrored that very atmosphere, the horrors of his childhood sounding to most like something woven from the pages of history books, casualties of war that people were more accustomed to reading about than experiencing themselves, the kind of abject terror that people swear to be moved by when in fact it is far beyond their empathetic grasp. Some tragedies demand experience to be understood. Will didn't dare ask him to retell that particular fable. Not yet.

No fence hopping was necessary this time. Armed with boltcutters, they severed the chain binding the gate. It swung open with an eerie creak, the result of decades of precipitation and disuse. The grass was soggy from recent rain, browned in some patches while overgrown and lush in others. Hannibal took graceful, deliberate steps, and Will hung back a bit, observing his long, confident stride and the way his eyes betrayed that bravado. Recognition flickered across his irises, a private memory of this grass and gate and fog that Will didn't have a window into.

“In the prime of the Lecter estate, there were thriving pear and apple orchards. Perfect for hiding in contemplation or in mischief as a child. Were they still flourishing now, they would be ripe for harvest soon.” Hannibal gazed off into the distance, ragged brush and twisted roots composing the landscape.

“Did you climb trees?” Will’s lips twitched, tugging into a reserved smile at the thought of a young Hannibal, barefoot and clumsy, hands grasping thick branches as he braced the arch of a small foot in the hollow of an apple tree.

“I did. I was rather adept at it, as I recall.” Hannibal smiled fleetingly at Will before turning toward the castle’s intimidating stone façade. “Shall we go inside?”

Will reached for Hannibal’s hand, and they wandered up the damp concrete footpath. For a second, Will thought the heavy, elaborate door wouldn’t budge, but it opened after a hearty push, a rush of stagnant air hitting their senses. A musty smell filled their noses, a product of wood rot and moisture buildup from unregulated drainage. Will couldn’t imagine the upkeep a property of this size and structural complexity required. Chiyoh had been sequestered in a specific part of the expansive castle for her residence as warden of a solitary prisoner. Will remembered drafty rooms that were left unadorned by anything other than cobwebs and debris, unlived in and unloved. He was beginning to feel like allowing Hannibal to see the estate in such disrepair, a far cry from its former grandeur, was a mistake. Hannibal walked through the high-ceiled entryway, eyeing the cracked dark blue of the ceiling. The white rib vaulting divided the ceiling into diamond shaped sections, lending the room the stately atmosphere of a Gothic cathedral.

“It must have been majestic in its time.” Will’s words echoed off the stone walls, booming and weak all at once.

“Yes. Yes, it was. Many prestigious events were hosted inside these walls, guests of repute received in the grand hall and ushered into the dining room by servants. It was here that I developed the zest for the feast.” When Hannibal turned to him, there was a melancholy look in his eyes not unlike the expression he wore when he first told Will about Mischa. “And, unbeknownst to my parents, the zest for the hunt as well. Is that why we came here? Hoping to enrich the minimal understanding you gained when you first set foot on the grounds in search of afterimages of me?”

“Maybe,” Will admitted. “Unwinding the threads that comprise you will always be as powerful of a motivator to me as it is to you. But I did want you to see him too. I *needed* you to.”

Hannibal made a noise of consideration that resounded in the strange acoustics of the hall, making it louder than it was intended to be.

“And my curiosity about you has long been established as both the greatest asset and most fatal flaw I possess.” Hannibal paused, absorbed in that thought and all that it encompassed, before fixing Will with a determined gaze. “Show me.”

Will nodded and turned to lead the way, every footfall careful as he tread through the dark landscape. Nightfall was approaching, and only slivers of light leaked in to illuminate the

vacant manor. Will wondered if Hannibal's footing was more confident than his own, his memory palace sketching in the details of every room as they went, filling in the backdrop from vivid illustrations of the past. He heard the click of Hannibal's loafers as they descended the solid steps. Will pulled a silver-plated lighter from his jacket pocket and leaned over the railing, flicking the cover off and setting alight the wicks of the long unattended candles that remained. Some refused to roar to life from excess water collected in their wax basins. He wished Hannibal could have seen his human sculpture the night of its inception, when the dank crypt of the basement had been brightened by the otherworldly light of all the candles Chiyoh perpetually burned.

The corpse came into view as they made their way around the curve of the staircase. It was undisturbed save for the decay. The putrid stench hit Will's nose, sucker punching his senses with a wave of nausea and repulsion. The flesh had mostly eroded from time and the appetite of the snails and probably other creatures seeking shelter as well, the bones dingy with ragged bits of rotten skin clinging to their smooth edges. A few greasy untamed mats of hair still adhered to the mostly clean skull. The effect was bizarre, like a poorly constructed wig put in place after the fact.

"Decomposition always takes longer than people think. The snails seemed to have hurried it along." Will stood before his dragonfly man and was pleased to see the serene look on Hannibal's face. "Do you like it?"

"Oh *Will*…" Hannibal tilted his head back to take in the whole scope of the canvas, the glints of the glass fragments rebounding off his bright eyes. "He's breathtaking. You transformed him into pure art, elevated him to something astounding. You gave him the wings that I clipped."

Hannibal's hand gingerly traced the edge of one wing, careful not to upset the structure but eager to be in contact with this extension of Will's magnificently macabre creativity. He turned back to Will, and a look of knowing, of communion, that simpatico bond that could never be erased, passed between them.

"I wish I had followed you here, hidden in the shadows and witnessed the very moment the muse whispered in your ear."

"You did. It was *you* whispering in my ear that night. Always you."

They slept in the bedroom that had been Chiyoh's as it was in better shape than the rest, replacing the linens with fresh ones they had brought with them. They brought a fire to life to banish the damp chill. Will had never seen a home with so many fireplaces, remnants of a heating system that was now obsolete but romantic and old-worldly in a way that was very enticing to him.

Lying in bed curled together like animals seeking warmth in the winter brush, Will wanted to ask everything. The banal, the complex, the inconsequential, and the vital. *Everything* about Hannibal that being in this place evoked.

Will wanted to ask, but he didn't want to demand anything Hannibal wasn't willing to give so he only asked the most important thing.

"Are we leaving in the morning?" Whispered against the back of his neck, lips pressing soft kisses into the skin.

Hannibal didn't answer straight away, and Will observed every cue his body offered, the hushed sigh, the hand curving around Will's arm, the barely audible swallow.

"There remains much to be seen here. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes." Will smiled and pressed his face against Hannibal's bare back.

The next morning, Will watched Hannibal collect a bouquet of wildflowers and arrange them on Mischa's grave. He didn't approach, didn't feel comfortable interrupting his private mourning. He watched from a few yards away, detangling vines and roots from where they had seeped into the drainage pipes along the north side of the manor. Will had been surveying the land and mentally mapping alert systems and protective barriers he could put in place around the perimeter. The acreage was vast, but there was no need to chart it to the exact edge. There would be time for a task like that, but the immediate concern would lie in instituting devices much closer to the actual castle.

Will constructed blueprints of the area in his head, taking walks in new directions each day and measuring as he went. He had always been resourceful and well-acquainted with nature and how to utilize the tools available within it. He knew he could do very well without even employing technological means although Hannibal might think it primitive. Or perhaps not. Perhaps he would marvel in Will's cunning in that way that made Will's heart almost feel too tight in his chest, like the confines of his ribcage couldn't contain the affection stirring within. Making a pledge to ask when Hannibal seemed ready to indulge the thought, Will traipsed toward a white willow, boots squelching in the mud as he marked the tree with a yellow flag.

After that first night, Will didn't ask again if Hannibal wanted to leave, but he also didn't inquire about how long they were staying. He immersed himself in the work of restoring the

house, glad to be useful in ways Hannibal was not and glad to be solving problems with his hands in the manner that had always soothed him. Hannibal asked Will to describe his process from time to time, thoroughly enjoying the detailed explanations about topics most people would find insipid. There was a childlike endearing bend to the questions, and it delighted Will to see his interest. Hannibal trusted him so completely with the well-being of the interior of his family home, these ancient walls that were teeming with the marks of not only Hannibal but other members of the Lecter clan that Will knew nothing of.

“Is it superfluous to renovate a building as immense as this for two people with no future plans for banquets and brimming ballrooms?”

Will stopped, wrench paused in its mending of the leaky pipe he had shimmied underneath.

“No offense, Hannibal, but you’ve always lived in a way that surpasses the needs of a single person. You’ve lived alone for decades but always in houses that could accommodate entire families. This might be an aggrandized version of that, sure, but I don’t see why it should give you a reason to doubt yourself now.” Will cranked the wrench around the bolt, turning it one final time after testing the tightness of the seal.

“The doubt lies with allowing you to exert yourself with extraneous tasks when perhaps your energy could be funneled elsewhere.” Hannibal slipped his hands into his pockets and fondly gazed down at Will and his work-sweat skin.

Will crawled out from under the sink, wiping his forehead with the edge of his shirt, lean stomach exposed.

“I don’t mind. You know this is the kind of work I’ve always enjoyed. Larger scale than I’m used to for sure, but most of it isn’t crucial to complete right away. I know how to demote repairs down the list in favor of ones that need more immediate attention.” Will leaned against the counter, and Hannibal’s eyes turned dark as they raked over Will’s body. Will didn’t bother to suppress his grin. “And besides that, I know you enjoy watching me work.”

Hannibal didn’t deny it, only smiled lasciviously. Will searched Hannibal’s eyes, gauging how amenable he was to questions about what the presence of this estate was extracting from within that brilliant mind.

“How do you feel…being here?”

Hannibal braced a hand on the countertop, the cogs of his mind visibly working as he formed an answer.

“Like there are trapdoors lying in wait to ensnare me. They can be found in the spaces between every stone, every crack in the plaster, every battered, porous surface expelling the venom of past trauma to threaten regression, to deny me of my insistence that nothing happened to me. I happened.” Hannibal leaned into the space next to Will, eyes trained on the floor. “Every molecule of the atmosphere is infused with events long forgotten, replaying them for those who search for the vibrations of their presence. They are shimmers hovering above the present, adjacent like another reality threatening to eclipse by reaching a spectral hand into ours. Sometimes the accuracy of a memory palace is a curse.”

“Hannibal…” Will came to stand in front of him and linked his hands behind Hannibal’s neck, his eyes layered with concern. “Why are we still here then?”

“There is value in mending the craquelure, denying the traps their power by reshaping the associations. The mind is malleable. You and I are experts where that art is concerned.” Hannibal stroked Will’s forearms and leaned in to press their lips together. “I like seeing you here. I like filling the rooms with the music of your labor and your thoughts and your pleasure. I feel the melodies and scents of your life drowning the imprints of the past, concertos of sorrow replaced by sprightly waltzes, new life breathed into the stale air, the bitter, soil-logged smells of death substituted for the heady fragrances of love.”

Will kissed him until they were both breathless.

“We’ll make it our sanctuary, Hannibal. Anything you want.”

Hannibal smiled and kissed Will’s forehead, pausing to inhale his scent.

“It already is.”

“Would you like to join me?”

Hannibal’s pilgrimages to Mischa’s headstone had become like clockwork. Every Wednesday and Saturday at two in the afternoon. Will never mentioned it and never intruded upon that time.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Hannibal stood by the door in his lightweight overcoat, suave and attractive, his silky hair swept to the side with no unruly flyaways to be found. It was chilly now that October was upon them, the hefty branches of the trees shaking brown, orange, and gold leaves to the ground, the calls of birds growing scarcer as the temperature dipped lower. Thankfully, Will had finished cleaning the flues for every fireplace. It was not an easy task considering the sheer number of chimneys on the premises.

He worried about Winston at first, fearing he would wander off and end up trapped in some faraway room Will didn’t even know existed, but the allure of the mysterious new residence wore off quickly. He mostly stuck to the rooms Will frequented, often peacefully napping in a furry mound by one of the fires. He enjoyed running through the extensive grounds and accompanying Will and Hannibal on long walks. Winston was bounding around one of the willow trees a few feet away, chasing some unseen apparition or a woodland creature hidden by leaves as Hannibal and Will approached the grave.

“Mischa would have liked you. She believed she could change me as well. She was willful, stronger than me, her years and small stature belying that strength. I believe she would have

relished the opportunity to watch you challenge me and reform my ideas about myself… about everything." Hannibal laid down a wreath he had fashioned from the branches of a fir tree interwoven with white and lavender flowers.

Words failed Will. He wanted to say he lamented that he would never meet this person who had meant so much to Hannibal, a person whose memory never receded with time and distance, the first person to show Hannibal that he had a capacity for love despite his apathy toward most. He wanted to say he was sorry for all the hardship he had endured before her death and after, but pity had no place here and Will knew Hannibal only wanted his presence, his warmth pressing into his flank as he completed the vigil. Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's waist from behind and nestled his chin into the crook of his neck.

"Thank you for letting me join you."

Hannibal squeezed Will's hand lightly, his palm cold from the brisk wind.

"Had she died under different circumstances, had my parents been alive to oversee the ceremony, there would have been a grand reception. A funeral for a child of noble blood in that time would have lasted days, many people travelling to pay respects to her untimely death. A pig would have been slaughtered for the funeral meal. Conditions as they were… none of that transpired." Will felt the rumbling of Hannibal's soothing voice on his cheek, and he tightened his embrace.

"When was her headstone made?"

"Many years later. I marked the spot in haste with a cross crudely formed from splintered firewood so that it could be found again. It was my uncle who eventually commissioned a more permanent memorial."

"We should always keep fresh flowers on her grave…as long as we're here." Will unlinked his arms and stood astride the tombstone. He cast his eyes heavenward. Pendulous black clouds were gathering in the sky. The air pressure was dropping, that telltale swirling of humidity, warmth and chill meeting at the crossroads to duel for supremacy in the atmosphere, surrounding them as the rains threatened to fall.

"Yes…as long as we're here." Hannibal linked arms with Will and watched the rapidly moving clouds for a second before meeting Will's gaze. There was a profound sense of acceptance written there, as though Hannibal had made an important decision. The decision to move forward but remain deferential, the past pushed through a mill, sediment and debris left behind in the process until only that which was useful and necessary remained.

They stayed past the first resonant crack of thunder, waiting for the storm to wage its elemental war, not seeking refuge in the castle walls until the raindrops grew heavy and violent.

“These were created during the Great Northern War but utilized sparsely until Lithuania found itself under German occupation during World War I. Soldiers were housed in the castle, and the tunnels became a means of privacy and unmonitored movement.” Hannibal held the lantern high as they moved through the clandestine passageways. They were expertly formed although in need of an extensive cleaning and quite cold. The stone enclosing them could provide surprisingly adequate insulation when there was heat nearby to absorb, but no such source existed down here.

Will couldn’t believe how far underground they extended. His imagination overflowed with vivid pictorials of the creatures worming their way into the earth around them, burrowing into soggy soil unseen by those above, hooked mouths and slimy bodies unsightly to those unaccustomed to their image. They turned a corner and were in a large, semi-circular chamber, another passage extending through an opening on the opposite side. They winded through the maze, Will internally etching a map as they went along, scrolling through the possibilities the secret areas held. When they emerged above ground, they were nearly half a mile away from the manor. It was an imposing structure even from this distance, but the cover of trees and the amount of space afforded them anonymity from anyone gazing out onto the horizon from the castle. Plans were forming, ideas hatching like the eggs of an ethereal creature not yet known to this world, revealing itself with glistening feathers as it poked through the robust outer shell, shaking afterbirth from its wings to unveil something entirely unexpected. Will turned to look at Hannibal and saw in his smile that he knew.

“Jack Crawford is missing. In all probability, Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham are responsible for his disappearance. We failed Jack.” Kade Prurnell halted her deliberate steps, the click of her heels on the tile coming to a stop as she swiveled to face the agents gathered before her. No one interrupted to ask questions. All eyes were focused on Kade, their expressions attentive and somber. One of their own, arguably the one among their ranks whom everyone in the room looked up to and considered to be the most capable of defending himself, had fallen victim to the dangers of the job.

“The bureau failed him. *I* failed him, but it won’t be in vain. Hannibal’s pathology doesn’t require him to kill very often, but that pathology is no longer the only thing that governs his behavior. This man,” Kade pressed a button on the small remote in her hand. A picture of Will Graham appeared on the projector screen behind her. The photo wasn’t a very forgiving one. His face was pinched, expression unapproachable, gaze hard.

Price and Zeller stood in the back, and Price couldn’t help but imagine Will dissecting her choice of photo, explaining the psychology behind her attempt to distance everyone in the room from empathy for him, to replace all association of their former colleague who worked alongside them in the pursuit of justice with the face of a callous, cold-blooded killer who possessed no remorse.

“This man…the one we thought we knew and then thought we didn’t and then thought we *did* again…this conniving, resourceful, uniquely-minded man who, much like Hannibal himself, is extremely anomalous and hard to define, is with him. His protégé, his partner, his lover. Will Graham turned away from everything he knew to be with Hannibal Lecter and won’t be taken in easily. To Will, Hannibal is the ultimate prize, the very best thing to ever happen to him and someone whom he would protect at all costs. Likewise, Hannibal risked his way of life for Will, eventually turning himself into the mercy of our very own bureau to prove his…*love*. Will is everything to Hannibal. When we find them, and we *will* find them, they won’t go down easily.”

“It’s a little hammy, don’t you think? Pontificating to all of you about my betrayal of the bureau, manipulating you with a well-chosen photograph of me like you’re children who need the big bad wolf to be drawn in scary, jagged lines to realize he’s *bad*.” Will turned to Jimmy Price with a wry smile, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose and slipping his hands into the pockets of his belted slacks. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say she didn’t have much faith in the abilities of everyone here to do what needs to be done.”

“I think you may be right, Will. She certainly never had much faith in Jack, and he was supposed to be crème de la crème around these parts.” Price smiled at the apparition leaning next to him against the wall.

“And what do you think, Jimmy? Will justice prevail in the end?” Will asked with a sardonic laugh.

“I don’t know…I think you’re both about as slippery as fish in an oil tank. If you *do* get caught, it will be a very Bonnie and Clyde blaze of glory, a nice cinematic ending for the ages.” Kade continued on at the front of the room, explaining the details of where Jack was last seen, what Margot and Alana had told them, and how she thought they should proceed. “Because I’m me, I have to ask, what’s sex with a cannibal like? Dangerous, thrilling, terrifying, perfection?”

“All of the above.” Will smiled and crossed his arms.

“Any regrets?”

“Not a single one.”

Jimmy Price smiled and shook his head. Zeller poked Price in the ribs, jolting him from his daydream.

“Quit zoning out! Kade’s out for blood and blame, and I’d like to avoid being on the receiving end of that!” Zeller hissed.

Price nodded and resumed listening to Kade’s speech.

“He will slip up. He has a weakness, and we can exploit it. It will take patience and vigilance, but eventually he will make a mistake. And this time,” Kade leaned forward on the podium, bracing the heels of her hands on the edge, “we’ll be there to catch him.”

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The winter was harsh but bearable. Will learned the ins and outs of maintaining the castle during inclement weather, the strengths and weaknesses within the structure and how best to make use of them. Hannibal was right at home in the kitchen fit for a king. There was no lack of space for the assembly of his grandiose feasts. The weather made it hard to make headway on the ideas Will had for security, but plans were formulated and finely honed. In the spring, the grounds would become a stealthy fortress, powerful defenses hidden by the grand expanse of the manicured acres.

Little by little, the spired gates around Hannibal's past receded into the ground. He told Will of his fraught relationship with Lady Murasaki and the dangerous temptation that the medical field proffered, how it changed from a logical hiding place into an arena where the sheep could be too easily unmasked as a wolf, the blood lust too great and far too accessible. He told him of his first kill but in depth this time, no cagey metaphors or vague descriptions. Will spoke of the last time he saw his father and of the parallel temptation of law enforcement that he was only now able to admit, of the first time a girl really touched him. Everything that mattered and everything that didn't. When Hannibal told Will the story of Mischa, the honest, full truth, Will couldn't contain himself. He covered Hannibal's face with kisses, soothed the aches of the past with firm fingers, and whispered his devotion into the nape of his neck.

They made love in front of the gargantuan mirror bordered with ornate carvings in Hannibal's bedroom, the fireplace crackling behind Will as he watched Hannibal watching him in the reflected glass. Will rode him slow and hard, Hannibal's arms threading around him until they were wound together like inseparable vines. Will admired the way the firelight caught on the sweat shining on Hannibal's working muscles, the way he held him so possessively, sturdy yet careful, like he couldn't bear to let him go and wouldn't ever let him break.

Will forced his eyes to stay open as he came, eager to see Hannibal's face in the mirror as he watched him come undone. It didn't disappoint. Something about seeing the reverse image echoed back at him was new. He'd seen Hannibal's face during moments like that so many times before, but there, captured in the clear glass, it was as though it was frozen solid in time and looking back at them both, a page in a storybook come to life. He watched Hannibal intently in the reflection as he spurted inside of Will a moment later, blissful and flushed and so unbelievably beautiful. They stayed fused together for a long while, Hannibal's cock softening inside him as they kissed the sweat from each other's shoulders, cheeks, and necks.

I'm not as scared about separation as I was because I don't think it's really possible. Not even through death.

They both knew the outside world would continue to threaten their sustainability, but it no longer mattered. Will imagined them dying on the grounds of the Lecter estate, surrounded by those who sought to apprehend them, all their implemented systems of safety failing as shots rang out, bullets severing flesh and muscle, the cords of life ripped from their station in

a ballistic flash, blood spray arcing across the ground and into the air. He imagined death taking them during a hunt many years later, when their strength and agility had atrophied with age, no longer able to best their chosen enemies as easily as they once were, thwarted by tricks they would have easily anticipated and avoided in younger times. He imagined them meeting their end by natural means, mundane causes surpassing their splendor, commonplace illnesses that didn't belong in their story infiltrating Hannibal's rarified body, defying all odds by killing Hannibal Lecter with something as unremarkable as a heart attack. Will imagined every way it could end, and he was not afraid. It didn't matter because Hannibal was the only option to Will, and Will was the only option to Hannibal. All risks and obstacles and curveballs of fate were feeble deterrents whose pale whispers neither man cared to train their ears toward. He kissed Hannibal's lips, drinking from his mouth like it contained the very essence of life itself, and knew he was ready for anything.

Chapter End Notes

When I started the predecessor to this fic, I Didn't Know It Could Be Like This, I had never completed a novella or novel length work. Something always stopped me (mostly fear and anxiety) so finishing it was a monumental thing for me. But there are always new challenges and weaknesses to face and overcome within the creative process, and although I dearly loved writing IDKICBLT, it wasn't very plot-heavy. I wanted to prove to myself that I could continue my Hannigram story in a way that presented obstacles for them and riddled out ways to solve those obstacles. While I'm still definitely a winding prose kind of author by nature (and I've grown to love that about myself rather than reject it now!), I am satisfied with how I presented problems and solutions in this fic. I'm proud of how it turned out in terms of character development and plot. I feel like I added more to my writing wheelhouse with this fic and hope to continue to do so.

Thank you so much to everyone who has given kudos or comments or shared this fic on Tumblr. I couldn't have done it without all of you, and I'm eternally grateful for the support of the Hannibal fandom. It's the sweetest, most accepting fandom I've ever had the pleasure of being part of. I'm not sure if I'll be undertaking another lengthy Hannigram fic. I got rather misty-eyed as I put the final touches on this chapter because it truly feels like the end of an era and saying goodbye to a dear friend. I might do one shots if people give me prompts or if an idea wakes me up in the middle of the night and won't let me go. As of now, I don't have any more plans for this pairing, but you never know. I tend to always say I'm going to take a fanfic writing break and then end up "accidentally" writing a new work lol.

Special thanks to my friend and beta @castellomargot for sticking with me throughout this whole process even when life got busy and demanding. I know I've said it before, but that feedback is so integral to my process. I feel a little unmoored when I don't have a fresh pair of eyes on my chapters!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!